



THE CAMERONS
OF Highboro
BETH·B·GILCHRIST



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THE CAMERONS
OF HIGHBORO



How good bacon tasted when you broiled it yourself on a
forked stick

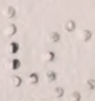
THE CAMERONS OF HIGHBORO

BY

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OF HIGHBORO

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CHAPTER I

ELLIOTT PLANS AND FATE DISPOSES

NOW and then the accustomed world turns a somersault; one day it faces you with familiar features, the next it wears a quite unrecognizable countenance. The experience is, of course, nothing new, though it is to be doubted whether it was ever staged so dramatically and on so vast a scale as during the past four years. And no one to whom it happens is ever the same afterward.

Elliott Cameron was not a refugee. She did not trudge Flemish roads with the pitiful salvage of her fortunes on her back, nor was she turned out of a cottage

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in Poland with only a sackful of her household treasures. Nevertheless, American girl though she was, she had to be evacuated from her house of life, the house she had been building through sixteen petted, autocratic years. This is the story of that evacuation.

It was made, for all the world, like any Pole's or Serbian's or Belgian's; material valuables she let pass with glorious carelessness, as they left the silver spoons in order to salvage some sentimental trifle like a baby-shoe or old love-letters. Elliott took the closing of her home as she had taken the disposal of the big car, cheerfully enough, but she could not leave behind some absurd little tricks of thought that she had always indulged in. She was as strange to the road as any Picardy peasant and as bewildered, with—shall I say it?—considerably less pluck and spirit than some of them, when the landmarks she had lived by were swept away. But they, you

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see, had a dim notion of what was happening to them. Elliott had none. She did n't even know that she was being evacuated. She knew only that ways which had always worked before had mysteriously ceased working, that prejudices and preoccupations and habits of mind and action, which she had spent her life in accumulating, she must now say good-by to, and that the war, instead of being across the sea, a thing one's friends and cousins sailed away to, had unaccountably got right into America itself and was interfering to an unreasonable extent in affairs that were none of its business.

Father came home one night from a week's absence and said, as he unfolded his napkin, "Well, chicken, I'm going to France."

They were alone at dinner. Miss Reynolds, the housekeeper, was dining out with friends, as she sometimes did; nights that, though they both liked Miss Rey-

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nolds, father and daughter checked with a red mark.

"To France?" A little thrill pricked the girl's spine as she questioned. "Is it Red Cross?"

"Not this time. An investigation for the government. It may, probably will, take months. The government wants a thorough job done. Uncle Samuel thinks your ancient parent competent to hold up one end of the thing."

"Stop!" Elliott's soft order commanded all her dimples.

"I won't have you maligning my father, you naughty man! Ancient parent, indeed! That's splendid, is n't it?"

"I rather like it. I was hoping it would strike you the same way."

"When do you go?"

"As soon as I can get my affairs in shape—I could leave to-morrow, if I had to. Probably I shall be off in a week or ten days."

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"I suppose the government did n't say anything about my investigating something, too?"

"Now you mention it, I do not recollect that the subject came up."

She shook her head reprovngly. "That *was* an omission! However, I think I'll go as your secretary."

Mr. Cameron smiled across the table. How pretty she was, how daintily arch in her sweetness! "That arrangement would be entirely satisfactory to me, my dear, but I am not taking a secretary. I shall get one over there, when I need one."

"But what can I go as?" pursued the girl. "I'd like to go as something."

Heavens! she looked as though she meant it! "I'm afraid you can't go, Lot, this time."

She lifted cajoling eyes. "But I want to. Oh, *I* know! I can go to school in Paris."

Her little air of having settled the mat-

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ter left him smiling but serious. "France has mouths enough to feed without one extra school-girl's, chicken."

"I don't eat much. Are you afraid of submarines?"

"For you, yes."

"I 'm not. Daddles dear, *may n't* I go? I 'd love to be near you."

"Positively, my love, you may not."

She drew down the corners of her mouth and went through a bewitching imitation of wiping tears out of her eyes. But she was n't really disappointed. She had been fairly certain in advance of what the verdict would be. There had been a bare chance, of something different—that was all, and it did n't pay to let chances, even the barest, go by default. So she crumbled her warbread and remarked thoughtfully, "I suppose I can stay at home, but it won't be very exciting."

Her father seemed to find his next words hard to say. "I had a notion we might

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close the house. It is rather expensive to keep up; not much point in doing so just for one, is there? In going to France I shall give my services."

"Of course. But the house—" The delicate brows lifted. "What were you thinking of doing with me?"

"Dumping you on the corner. What else?" The two laughed together as at a good joke. But there was a tightening in the man's throat. He wondered how soon, after next week, he would again be sitting at table opposite that vivacious young face.

"Seriously, Lot, I met Bob in Washington. He was there on conservation business. When he heard what I was contemplating, he asked you up to Highboro. Said Jessica and he would be delighted to have you visit them for a year. They're generous souls. It struck me as a good plan. Your uncle is a fine man, and I have always admired his wife. I've never seen

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as much of her as I'd have liked. What do you say to the idea?"

"Um-m-m." Elliott did not commit herself. "Uncle Bob and Aunt Jessica are very nice, but I don't know them."

"House full of boys and girls. You won't be lonely."

The piquant nose wrinkled mischievously. "That would never do. I like my own way too well."

He laughed. "And you generally manage to get it by hook or by crook!"

"I? You malign me. You *give* it to me because you like me."

How adorably pretty she looked!

He laughed again. "You've got your old dad there, all right. Yes, yes, you've got him there!"

"Didn't I tell you just now that you mustn't call my father old?"

"So you did! So you did! Well, well, the truth will out now and then, you know. *Could* you inveigle Jane into giving us

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more butter?—By the way, here's a letter from Jessica. I found it in the stack on my desk to-night. Better read it before you say no."

"Oh, I will," Elliott received the letter without enthusiasm. "Very good of her, I'm sure. I'll write and thank her tomorrow; but I think I'll go to Aunt Nell's."

"Just as you say. You know Elinor better. But I rather incline to Bob and Jess. There is something to be said for variety, Lot."

"Yes, but a year is so long. Why, Father Cameron, a year is three hundred and sixty-five whole days long and I don't know how many hours and minutes and—and seconds. The seconds are awful! Daddles darling, I never could support life away from you in a perfectly strange family for all those interminable seconds!"

"Your own cousins, chicken; and they

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would n't seem strange long. I've a notion they'd help make time hustle. Better read the letter. It's a good letter."

"I will—when I don't have you to talk to. What's the matter?"

"Bless me, I forgot to tell Miss Reynolds! Nell's coming to-night. Wired half an hour ago."

"Aunt Nell? Oh, jolly!" The slender hands clapped in joyful pantomime. "But don't worry about Miss Reynolds. I will tell Anna to make a room ready. Now we can settle things talking. It's so much more satisfactory than writing."

The man laughed. "Can't say no, so easily, eh, chicken?"

She joined in his laugh. "There is something in that, of course, but it is n't very polite of you to insinuate that any one would *wish* to say no to me."

"I stand corrected of an error in tact. No, I can't quite see Elinor turning you down."

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That was the joy of these two; they were such boon companions, like brother and sister together instead of father and daughter.

But now Elliott, too, remembered something. "Oh, Father! Quincy has scarlet fever!"

"Scarlet fever? When did he come down?"

"Just to-day. They suspected it yesterday, and Stannard came over to Phil Tracy's. To-day the doctor made sure. So Maude and Grace are going right on from the wedding to that Western ranch where they were invited. All their outfits are in the house here, but they will get new ones in New York."

"Where's James?"

"Uncle James went to the hotel, and Aunt Margaret, of course, is quarantined. Quincy is n't very sick. They've postponed all their house-parties for two months."

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"H'm. Where do they think the boy caught it?"

"Not an idea. He came home from school Thursday."

"Well, Cedarville will be minus Camerons for a while, won't it?"

"It certainly will. Both houses closed—or Uncle James's virtually so. Do you know what Aunt Nell is coming for?"

"Not the ghost of a notion. Perhaps she is going to adopt a dozen young Belgians and wants me to draw up the papers."

"Mercy! I hope not a whole dozen, if I am to stay at Clover Hill with her. Half a dozen would be enough."

"Want you at Clover Hill?" said Aunt Elinor, when the first greetings were over and she had heard the news. "Why, you dear child, of course I do! Or rather I should, if I were to be there myself. But I'm going to France, too."

"To France!"

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“Red Cross,” with an enthusiastic nod of the perfectly dressed head. “Lou Emery and I are going over. That’s what I stopped off to tell you people. Ran down to New York to see about my papers. It’s all settled. We sail next week. Now I’m hurrying back to shut up Clover Hill. Then for something worth while! Do you know,” the fine eyes turned from contemplation of a great mass of pink roses on the table, “I feel as though I were on the point of beginning to live at last. All my days I have spent dashing about madly in search of a good time. Now—well, now I shall go where I’m sent, live for weeks, maybe, without a bath, sleep in my clothes in any old place, when I sleep at all; but I’m crazy, simply crazy to get over there and begin.”

It was then that Elliott began dimly to sense a predicament. Even then she did n’t recognize it for an *impasse*. Such things did n’t happen to Elliott Cameron.

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But she did wish that Quincy had selected another time for isolating her Uncle James's house. Not that she particularly desired to spend a year, or a fraction of a year, with the James Camerons, but they were preferable to her Uncle Robert's family, on the principle that ills you know and understand make a safer venture than a jump in the dark. Nothing radical was wrong with the Robert Camerons except that they were dark horses. They lived farther away than the other Camerons, which would n't have mattered—geography seldom bothered a Cameron—if they had n't chosen to let it. On second thoughts, perhaps that, however, was exactly what did matter. Elliott understood that the Robert Camerons were poor. More than once she had heard her father say he feared "Bob was hard up." But Bob was as proud as he was hard up; Elliott knew that Father had never succeeded in lending him any money.

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She let these things pass through her mind as she reviewed the situation. Proud and independent and poor—those were worthy qualities, but they did not make any family interesting. They were more apt, Elliott thought, to make it uninteresting. No, the Robert Camerons were out of the question, kindly though they might be. If she must spend a year outside her own home, away from her father-comrade, she preferred to spend it with her own sort.

There is this to be said for Elliott Cameron; she had no mother, had had no mother since she could remember. The mother Elliott could not remember had been a very lovely person, and as broad-minded as she was charming. Elliott had her mother's charm, a personal magnetism that twined people around her little finger, but she was essentially narrow-minded. With Elliott it was a matter of upbringing, of coming-up rather, since within somewhat wide limits her upbringing had, after

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all, been largely in her own hands. Henry Cameron had had neither the heart nor the will to thwart his only child.

Before she went to bed, Elliott, curled up on her window-seat, read Aunt Jessica's letter. It was a good letter, a delightful letter, and more than that. If she had been older, she might, just from reading it, have seen why her father wanted her to go to Highboro. As it was, something tugged at her heartstrings for a moment, but only for a moment. Then she swung her foot over the edge of the window-seat and disposed of the situation, as she had always disposed of situations, to her liking. She had no notion that the Fates this time were against her.

The next day her cousin Stannard Cameron came over. Stannard was a long, lazy youth, with a notion that what he did or did n't do was a matter of some importance to the universe. All the Camerons were inclined to that supposition, all but

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the Robert Camerons; and we don't know about them yet.

"So they 're going to ship me up into the wilds of Vermont to Uncle Bob's," he ended his tale of woe. "They 'll be long on the soil, and all that rot. Have a farm, have n't they?"

"I was invited up there, too," said Elliott.

"*You!*" An instant change became visible in the melancholy countenance. "Going?"

"No, I think not."

"Oh, come on! Be a sport. We'd have fun together."

"I 'll be a sport, but not that kind."

"Guess again, Elliott. You and I could paint the place red, whatever kind of a shack it is they 've got."

"Stannard," said the girl, "you're terribly young. If you think I'd go anywhere with you and put up any kind of a game on our cousins—*cousins*, Stan—"

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"There are cousins and cousins."

She shook her head. "No wilds in mine. When do you start?"

"To-morrow, worse luck! What *are* you going to do?"

She smiled tantalizingly. "I have made plans." True, she had made plans. The fact that the second party to the transaction was not yet aware of their existence did not alter the fact that she had made them. Then she devoted herself to the despondent Stannard, and sent him away cheered almost to the point of thinking, when he left the house, that Vermont was not quite off the map.

Not so Elizabeth Royce. Bess knew precisely what was on the map, and had Vermont been there, she would have noticed it. There was not much, Miss Royce secretly flattered herself, that escaped her. She had heard of Mr. Robert Cameron; but whether he resided in Kamchatka or Timbuctoo she could not have told you.

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Mr. Robert Cameron, she had adduced with an acumen beyond her years, was the unsuccessful member of a highly successful family. And now Elliott, adorable Elliott, was to be marooned in this uncharted district for a whole year. It was unthinkable!

"But, Elliott darling, you'd *die* in Vermont!"

"Oh, no!" said Elliott; "I don't think I should find it pleasant, but I should n't die."

"Pleasant!" sniffed Miss Royce. "I should say not."

"It *is* rather far away from everybody. Think of not seeing you for a year, Bess!"

"I don't want to think of it. What's the matter with your Uncle James's house when the quarantine's lifted?"

"Nothing. But it has only just been put on."

"And the tournament next week. You *can't* miss that! Oh, *Elliott!*"

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"I think," remarked Elliott pensively, "there ought to be a home opened for girls whose fathers are in France."

"Why," asked Bess, gripped by a great idea, "why should n't you come to us while your uncle's house is quarantined?"

Why not, indeed? Elliott thought Bess a little slow in arriving at so obvious and satisfactory a solution of the whole difficulty, but she was properly reluctant about accepting in haste. "Would n't that be too much trouble? Of course, it would be perfectly lovely for me, but what would your mother say?"

"Mother will love to have you!" Miss Royce spoke with conviction.

They spent the rest of the afternoon making plans and Elizabeth went home walking on air.

But Mother, alas! proved a stumbling-block. "That would be very nice," she said, "very nice indeed; but Elliott Cameron has plenty of relatives. They will

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make some arrangement among them. I should hardly feel at liberty to interfere with their plans."

"But her Aunt Elinor is going to France, and you know the James Camerons' house is in quarantine. That leaves only the Vermont Camerons—"

"Oh, yes. I remember, now, there was a third brother. They have their plans, probably."

And that was absolutely all Bess could get her mother to say.

"But, Mother," she almost sobbed at last, "I—I *asked* her!"

"Then I am afraid you will have to unask her," said Mrs. Royce. "We really can't get another person into the house this summer, with your Aunt Grace and her family coming in July."

Then it was that Elliott discovered the *impasse*. Try as she would, she could find no way out, and she lost a good deal of sleep in the attempt. To have to do some-

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thing that she did n't wish to do was intolerable. You may think this very silly; if you do, it shows that you have not always had your own way. Elliott had never had anything but her own way. That it had been in the main a sweet and likable way did not change the fact. And how Stannard would gloat over her! He had had to do the thing himself, but secretly she had looked down on him for it, just as she had always despised girls who lamented their obligation to go to places where they did not wish to go. There was always, she had held, a way out, if you used your brains. Altogether, it was a disconcerted, bewildered, and thoroughly put-out young lady who, a week later, found herself taking the train for Highboro. The world—her familiar, complacent, agreeable world—had lost its equilibrium.

CHAPTER II

THE END OF A JOURNEY

HOURS later, from a red-plush, Pullmanless train, Elliott Cameron stepped down to three people—a tall, dark, surprisingly pretty girl a little older than herself, a chunky girl of twelve, and a middle-sized, freckle-faced boy. The boy took her bag and asked for her trunk-checks quite as well as any of her other cousins could have done and the tall girl kissed her and said how glad they were to have the chance to know her.

“I am Laura,” she said, “and here is Gertrude; and Henry will bring up your trunks to-morrow, unless you need them to-night. Mother sent you her love. Oh, we ’re so glad to have you come!”

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Then it is to be feared that Elliott perjured herself. Her all-day journey had not in the least reconciled her to the situation; if anything, she was feeling more bewildered and put out than when she started. But surprise and dismay had not routed her desire to please. She smiled prettily as her glance swept the welcoming faces, and kissed the girls and handed the boy two bits of pasteboard, and said—Oh, Elliott!—how delighted she was to see them at last. You would never have dreamed from Elliott's lips that she was not overjoyed at the chance to come to Highboro and become acquainted with cousins that she had never known.

But Laura, who was wiser than she looked, noticed that the new-comer's eyes were not half so happy as her tongue. Poor dear, thought Laura, how pretty she was and how daintily patrician and charming! But her father was on his way to France! And though he went in civilian

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capacity and was n't in the least likely to get hurt, when they were seated in the car Laura leaned over and kissed her new cousin again, with the recollection warm on her lips of empty, anxious days when she too had waited for the release of the cards announcing safe arrivals overseas.

Elliott, who was every minute realizing more fully the inexorableness of the fact that she was where she was and not where she was n't, kissed back without much thought. It was her nature to kiss back, however she might feel underneath, and the surprising suddenness of the whole affair had left her numb. She really had n't much curiosity about the life into which she was going. What did it matter, since she did n't intend to stay in it? Just as soon as the quarantine was lifted from Uncle James's house she meant to go back to Cedarville. But she did notice that the little car was not new, that on their way

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through the town every one they met bowed and smiled, that Henry had amazingly good manners for a country boy, that Laura looked very strong, that Gertrude was all hands and elbows and feet and eyes, and that the car was continually either climbing up or sliding down hills. It slid out of the village down a hill, and it was climbing a hill when it met squarely in the road a long, low, white house, canopied by four big elms set at the four corners, and gave up the ascent altogether with a despairing honk-honk of its horn.

A lady rose from the wide veranda of the white house, laid something gray on a table, and came smilingly down the steps. A little girl of eight followed her, two dogs dashed out, and a kitten. The road ran into the yard and stopped; but behind the house the hill kept on going up. Elliott understood that she had arrived at the Robert Camerons'.



Laura took the new cousin up to her room

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The lady, who was tall and dark-haired, like Laura, but with lines of gray threading the black, put her arms around the girl and kissed her. Even in her preoccupation, Elliott was dimly aware that the quality of this embrace was subtly different from any that she had ever received before, though the lady's words were not unlike Laura's. "Dear child," she said, "we are so glad to know you." And the big dark eyes smiled into Elliott's with a look that was quite new to that young person's experience. She did n't know why she felt a queer thrill run up her spine, but the thrill was there, just for a minute. Then it was gone and the girl only thought that Aunt Jessica had the most fascinating eyes that she had ever seen; whenever she chose, it seemed that she could turn on a great steady light to shine through their velvety blackness.

Laura took the new cousin up to her room. The house through which they

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passed seemed rather a barren affair, but somehow pleasant in spite of its dark painted floors and rag rugs and unmistakably shabby furniture. Flowers were everywhere, doors stood open, and breezes blew in at the windows, billowing the straight scrim curtains. The guest's room was small and slant-ceilinged. One picture, an unframed photograph of a big tree leaning over a brook, was tacked to the wall; a braided rug lay on the floor; on a small table were flowers and a book; over the queer old chest of drawers hung a small mirror; there was no pier-glass at all. Very spotless and neat, but bare—hopelessly bare, unless one liked that sort of thing.

There was one bit of civilization, however, that these people appreciated—one's need of warm water. As Elliott bathed and dressed, her spirits lightened a little. It did rather freshen a person's outlook, on a hot day, to get clean. She even

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opened the book to discover its name. "Lorna Doone." Was that the kind of thing they read at the farm? She had always meant to read "Lorna Doone," when she had time enough. It looked so interminably long. But there would n't be much else to do up here, she reflected. Then she surveyed what she could of herself in the dim little mirror—probably Laura would wish to copy her style of hair-dressing—and descended, very slender and chic, to supper.

It was a big circle which sat down at that supper-table. There was Uncle Robert, short and jolly and full of jokes, who wished to hear all about everybody and plied Elliott with questions. There was another new cousin, a wiry boy called Tom, and a boy older than Henry, who certainly was n't a cousin, but who seemed very much one of the family and who was introduced as Bruce Fearing. And there was Stannard. Stannard had returned in

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high feather from Upton and intercourse with a classmate whom he would doubtless have termed his kind. Stannard was inclined for a minute or two to indulge in code talk with Elliott. She did not encourage him and it amused her to observe how speedily the conversation became general again, though in quite what way it was accomplished she could not detect.

But if these new cousins' manners were above reproach, their supper-table was far from sophisticated. No maid appeared, and Gertrude and Tom and eight-year-old Priscilla changed the plates. Laura and Aunt Jessica, Elliott noticed, had entered from the kitchen. It was no secret that all the girls had been berrying in the forenoon. Henry seemed to have had a hand in making the ice-cream, judging by the compliments he received. So that was the way they lived, thought the new guest! It was, however, a surprisingly good supper. Elliott was astonished at herself for

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eating so much salad, so many berries and muffins, and for passing her plate twice for ice-cream.

After supper every one seemed to feel it the natural thing to set to work and "do" the dishes, or something else equally pressing; at least every one for a short time grew amazingly busy. Even Elliott asked for an apron—it was Elliott's code when in Rome to do as the Romans do—though she was relieved when her uncle tucked her arm in his and said she must come and talk to him on the porch. As they left the kitchen, the boy Bruce was skilfully whirling a string mop in a pan full of hot suds.

Under cover of animated chatter with her uncle Elliott viewed the prospect dolefully. Dish-washing came three times a day, did n't it? The thing was evidently a family rite in this household. The girl understood her respite could be only temporary; self-respect would see to that.

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But did n't she catch a glimpse of Stannard nonchalantly sauntering around a corner of the house with the air of one who hopes his back will not be noticed?

Presently she discovered another household custom—to go up to the top of the hill to watch the sunset. Up between flowering borders and through a grassy orchard the path climbed, thence to wind through thickets of sweet fern and scramble around boulders over a wild, fragrant pasture slope. It was beautiful up there on the hilltop, with its few big sheltering trees, its welter of green crests on every side, and its line of far blue peaks behind which the sun went down—beautiful but depressing. Depressing because every one, except Stannard, seemed to enjoy it so. Elliott could n't help seeing that they were having a thoroughly good time. There was something engaging about these cousins that Elliott had never seen among her cousins at home, a good-fellow-

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ship that gave one in their presence a sense of being closely knit together; of something solid, dependable and secure, for all its lightness and variety. But, oh, dear! she knew that she was n't going to care for the things that they cared for, or enjoy doing the things that they did! And there must be at least six weeks of this—dish-washing and climbing hills, with good frocks on. Six weeks, not a day longer. But she exclaimed in pretty enthusiasm over Laura's disclosure of a bed of maidenhair fern, tasted approvingly Tom's spring water, recited perfectly, after only one hearing, Henry's tale of the peaks in view, and let Bruce Fearing give her a geography lesson from the southernmost point of the hilltop.

It was only when at last she was in bed in the slant-ceilinged room, with her candle blown out and a big moon looking in at the window, that Elliott quite realized how forlorn she felt and how very, very far

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three thousand miles from Father was actually going to seem.

The world up here in Vermont was so very still. There were no lights except the stars, and for a person accustomed to an electrically illuminated street only a few rods from her window, stars and a moon merely added to the strangeness. Soft noises came from the other rooms, sounds of people moving about, but not a sound from outside, nothing except at intervals the cry of a mournful bird. After a while the noises inside ceased. Elliott lay quiet, staring at the moonlit room, and feeling more utterly miserable than she had ever felt before in her life. Homesick? It must be that this was homesickness. And she had been wont to laugh, actually laugh, at girls who said they were homesick! She had n't known that it felt like this! She had n't known that anything in all the world could feel as hideous as this. She knew that in a minute

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she was going to cry—she could n't help herself; actually, Elliott Cameron was going to cry.

A gentle tap came at the door. "Are you asleep?" whispered a voice. "May I come in?"

Laura entered, a tall white shape that looked even taller in the moonlight.

"*Are* you sleepy?" she whispered.

"Not in the least," said Elliott.

Laura settled softly on the foot of the bed. "I hoped you were n't. Let's talk. Does n't it seem a shame to waste time sleeping on a night like this?"

Elliott tossed her a pillow. It was comforting to have Laura there, to hear a voice saying something, no matter what it was talking about. And Laura's voice was very pleasant and what she said was pleasant, too.

Soon another shape appeared at the door Laura had left half-open. "It is too fine a night to sleep, is n't it, girls?" Aunt

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Jessica crossed the strip of moonlight and dropped down beside Laura.

"Are you all in here?" presently inquired a third voice. "I could hear you talking and, anyway, I could n't sleep."

"Come in," said Elliott.

Gertrude burrowed comfortably down on the other side of her mother.

Elliott, watching the three on the foot of her bed, thought they looked very happy. Her aunt's hair hung in two thick braids, like a girl's, over her shoulders, and her face, seen in the moonlight, made Elliott feel things that she could n't fit words to. She did n't know what it was she felt, exactly, but the forlornness inside her began to grow less and less, until at last, when her aunt bent down and kissed her and a braid touched the pillow on each side of Elliott's face, it was quite gone.

"Good night, little girl," said Aunt Jessica, "and happy dreams."

CHAPTER III

CAMERON FARM

ELLIOTT opened her eyes to bright sunshine. For a minute she could n't think where she was. Then the strangeness came back with a stab, not so poignant as on the night before but none the less actual.

"Oh," said a small, eager voice, "do you think you're going to stay waked up now?"

Elliott's eyes opened again, opened to see Priscilla's round, apple-cheeked face at the door.

"It is n't nice to peek, I know, but I'm going to get your breakfast, and how could I tell when to start it unless I watched to see when you waked up?"

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"*You* are going to get my breakfast?" Elliott rose on one elbow in astonishment. "All alone?"

"Oh, yes!" said Priscilla. "Mother and Laura are making jelly, and shelling peas in between—to put up, you know—and Trudy is pitching hay, so they can't. Will you have one egg or two? And do you like 'em hard-boiled or soft; or would you rather have 'em dropped on toast? And how long does it take you to dress?"

"One—soft-boiled, please. I'll be down in half an hour."

"Half an hour will give me lots of time." The small face disappeared and the door closed softly.

Elliott rose breathlessly and looked at her watch. Half an hour! She must hurry. Priscilla would expect her. Priscilla had the look of expecting people to do what they said they would. And hereafter, of course, she must get up to breakfast. She wondered how Priscilla's break-

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fast would taste. Heavens, how these people worked!

As a matter of fact, Priscilla's breakfast tasted delicious. The toast was done to a turn; the egg was of just the right softness; a saucer of fresh raspberries waited beside a pot of cream, and the whole was served on a little table in a corner of the veranda.

"Laura said you'd like it out here," Priscilla announced anxiously. "Do you?"

"Very much indeed."

"That's all right, then. I'm going to have some berries and milk right opposite you. I always get hungry about this time in the forenoon."

"When do you have breakfast, regular breakfast, I mean?"

"At six o'clock in summer, when there's so much to do."

Six o'clock! Elliott turned her gasp of astonishment into a cough.

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"I sometimes choke," said Priscilla, "when I'm awfully hungry."

"Does Stannard eat breakfast at six?" Elliott felt she must get to the bed-rock of facts.

"Oh, yes!"

"What is he doing now?"

Priscilla wrinkled her small brow. "Father and Bruce and Henry are haying, and Tom's hoeing carrots. I *think* Stan's hoeing carrots, too. One day last week he hoed up two whole rows of beets; he thought they were weeds. Oh!" A small hand was clapped over the round red mouth. "I didn't mean to tell you that. Mother said I mustn't ever speak of it, 'cause he'd feel bad. Don't you think you could forget it, quick?"

"I've forgotten it now."

"That's all right, then. After breakfast I'm going to show you my chickens and my calf. Did you know, I've a whole calf all to myself?—a black-and-whitey

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one. There are some cunning pigs, too. Maybe you 'd like to see them. And then I 'spect you 'll want to go out to the hay-field, or maybe make jelly."

"Oh, yes," said Elliott, "I can't see any of it too soon." But she was ashamed of her double meaning, with those round, eager eyes upon her. And her heart went down quite into her boots.

But the chickens, she had to confess, were rather amusing. Priscilla had them all named and was quite sure some of them, at least, answered to their names and not merely to the sound of her voice. She appealed to Elliott for corroboration on this point and Elliott grew almost interested trying to decide whether or not Chanticleer knew he was "Chanticleer" and not "Sunflower." There were also "Fluff" and "Scratch" and "Lady Gay" and "Ruby Crown" and "Marshal Haig" and "General Pétain" and many more, besides "Brevity," so named because, as Pris-

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cilla solicitously explained, she never seemed to grow. They all, with the exception of Brevity, looked as like as peas to Elliott, but Priscilla seemed to have no difficulty in distinguishing them.

Priscilla's enthusiasm was contagious; or, to be more exact, it was so big and warm and generous that it covered any deficiency of enthusiasm in another. Elliott found herself trailing Priscilla through the barns and even out to see the pigs, meeting Ferdinand Foch, the very new colt, and Kitchener of Khartoum, who had been a new colt three years before, and almost holding hands with the "black-and-whitey" calf, which Priscilla had very nearly decided to call General Pershing. And didn't Elliott think that would be a nice name, with "J.J." for short? Elliott had barely delivered herself of a somewhat amused affirmative (though the amusement she knew enough to conceal), when the small tongue tripped into the

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pigs' roster. Every animal on the farm seemed to have a name and a personality. Priscilla detailed characteristics quite as though their possessors were human.

It was an enlightened but somewhat surfeited cousin whom Priscilla blissfully escorted into the summer kitchen, a big latticed space filled with the pleasant odors of current jelly. On the broad table stood trays of ruby-filled glasses.

"We 've seen all the creatures," Priscilla announced jubilantly "and she loves 'em. Oh, the jelly 's done, is n't it? Mumsie, may we scrape the kettle?"

Aunt Jessica laughed. "Elliott may not care to scrape kettles."

Priscilla opened her eyes wide at the absurdity of the suggestion. "You do, don't you? You must! Everybody does. Just wait a minute till I get spoons."

"I don't think I quite know how to do it," said Elliott.

The next minute a teaspoon was thrust

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into her hand. "Did n't you *ever?*" Priscilla's voice was both aghast and pitying. "It wastes a lot, not scraping kettles. Good as candy, too. Here, you begin." She pushed a preserving-kettle forward hospitably.

Elliott hesitated.

"*I'll* show you." The small hand shot in, scraped vigorously for a minute, and withdrew, the spoon heaped with ruddy jelly. "There! Mother did n't leave as much as usual, though. I 'spect it's 'cause sugar's so scarce. She thought she must put it all into the glasses. But there's always something you can scrape up."

"It is delicious," said Elliott, graciously; "and what a lovely color!"

Priscilla beamed. "You may have two scrapes to my one, because you have so much time to make up."

"You generous little soul! I could n't

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think of doing that. We will take our 'scrapes' together."

Priscilla teetered a little on her toes. "I like you," she said. "I like you a whole lot. I'd hug you if my hands were n't sticky. Scraping kettles makes you awful sticky. You make me think of a princess, too. You're so bee-yeautiful to look at. Maybe that is n't polite to say. Mother says it is n't always nice to speak right out all you think."

The dimples twinkled in Elliott's cheeks. "When you think things like that, it is polite enough." In the direct rays of Priscilla's shining admiration she began to feel like her normal, petted self once more. Complacently she followed the little girl into the main kitchen. It was a long, low, sunny room with a group of three windows at each end, through which the morning breeze pushed coolly. Between the windows opened many doors. At one side

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stood a range, all shining nickel and cleanly black. Opposite the range, at a gleaming white sink, Aunt Jessica was busying herself with many pans. At an immaculately scoured table Laura was pouring peas into glass jars. On the walls was a blue-and-white paper; even the woodwork was white.

"I did n't know a kitchen," Elliott spoke impulsively, "could be so pretty."

"This is our work-room," said her aunt. "We think the place where we work ought to be the prettiest room in the house. White paint requires more frequent scrubbing than colored paint; but the girls say they don't mind, since it keeps our spirits smiling. Would you like to help dry these pans? You will find towels on that line behind the stove."

Elliott brought the dish-towels, and proceeded to forget her own surprise at the request in the interest of Aunt Jessica's talk. Mrs. Cameron had a lovely

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voice; the girl did not remember ever having heard a more beautiful voice, and it was used with a cultured ease that suddenly reminded Elliott of an almost forgotten remark once made in her hearing by Stannard's mother. "It is a sin and shame," Aunt Margaret had said, "to bury a woman like Jessica Cameron on a farm. What possessed her to let Robert take her there in the first place is beyond my comprehension. Granting that first mistake, why she has let him stay all these years is another enigma. Robert is all very well, but Jessica! I would defy any one to produce the situation *anywhere* that Jessica would n't be equal to."

That had been a good deal for Aunt Margaret to say. Elliott had realized it at the time and wondered a little; now she understood the words, or thought she did. Why, even drying milk-pans took on a certain distinction when it was done in Aunt Jessica's presence!

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Then Aunt Jessica said something that really did surprise her young guest. She had been watching the girl closely, quite without Elliott's knowledge.

"Perhaps you would like this for your own special part of the work," she said pleasantly. "We each have our little chores, you know. I could n't let every girl attempt the milk things, but you are so careful and thorough that I have n't the least hesitation about giving them to you. Now I am going to wash the separator. Watch me, and then you will know just what to do."

The words left Elliott gasping. Wash the separator, all by herself, every day—or was it twice a day?—for as long as she stayed here! And pans—all these pans? What was a separator, anyway? She wished flatly to refuse, but the words stuck in her throat. There was something about Aunt Jessica that you could n't say no to. Aunt Jessica so palpably expected you to

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be delighted. She was discriminating, too. She had recognized at once that Elliott was not an ordinary girl. But—but—

It was all so disconcerting that self-possessed Elliott stammered. She stammered from pure surprise and chagrin and a confusing mixture of emotions, but what she stammered was in answer to Aunt Jessica's tone and extracted from her by the force of Aunt Jessica's personality. The words came out in spite of herself.

"Oh—oh, thank you," she said, a bit blankly. Then she blushed with confusion. How awkward she had been. Ought n't Aunt Jessica to have thanked her?

If Aunt Jessica noticed either the confusion or the blankness, she gave no sign.

"That will be fine!" she said heartily. "I saw by the way you handled those pans that I could depend on you."

Insensibly Elliott's chin lifted. She re-

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garded the pans with new interest. "Of course," she assented, "one has to be particular."

"Very particular," said Aunt Jessica, and her dark eyes smiled on the girl.

The words, as she spoke them, sounded like a compliment. It might n't be so bad, Elliott reflected, to wash milk-pans every morning. And in Rome you do as the Romans do. She watched closely while Aunt Jessica washed the separator. She could easily do that, she was sure. It did not seem to require any unusual skill or strength or brain-power.

"It is not hard work," said Aunt Jessica, pleasantly. "But so many girls are n't dependable. I could n't count on them to make everything clean. Sometimes I think just plain dependableness is the most delightful trait in the world. It's so rare, you know."

Elliott opened her eyes wide. She had been accustomed to hear charm and wit

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and vivacity spoken of in those terms, but dependableness? It had always seemed such a homely, commonplace thing, not worth mentioning. And here was Aunt Jessica talking of it as of a crown jewel! Right down in her heart at that minute Elliott vowed that the separator should always be clean.

The separator, however, must not commit her indiscriminately, she saw that clearly. Perhaps in fact, it would save her. Had n't Aunt Jessica said each had her own tasks? Ergo, you let others alone. But she had an uncomfortable feeling that this reasoning might prove false in practice; in this household a good many tasks seemed to be pooled. How about them?

And then Laura looked up from her jars and said the oddest thing yet in all this morning of odd sayings: "Oh, Mother, may n't we take our dinner out? It is such a perfectly beautiful day!" As though a

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beautiful day had anything to do with where you ate your dinner!

But Aunt Jessica, without the least surprise in her voice, responded promptly: "Why, yes! We have three hours free now, and it seems a crime to stay in the house."

What in the world did they mean?

Priscilla seemed to have no difficulty in understanding. She jumped up and down and cried: "Oh, goody! goody! We're going to take our dinner out! We're going to take our dinner out! Isn't it *jolly?*"

She was standing in front of Elliott as she spoke, and the girl felt that some reply was expected of her. "Why, can we? Where do we go?" she asked, exactly as though she expected to see a hotel spring up out of the ground before her eyes.

"Lots of days we do," said Priscilla. "We'll find a nice place. Oh, I'm glad it takes peas three whole hours to can them-

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selves. I think they're kind of slow, though, don't you?"

Laura noticed the bewilderment on Elliott's face. "Priscilla means that we are going to eat our dinner out-of-doors while the peas cook in the hot-water bath," she explained. "Don't you want to pack up the cookies? You will find them in that stone crock on the first shelf in the pantry, right behind the door. There's a paste-board box in there, too, that will do to put them in."

"How many shall I put up?" questioned Elliott.

"Oh, as many as you think we'll eat. And I warn you we have good appetites."

Those were the vaguest directions, Elliott thought, that she had ever heard; but she found the box and the stone pot of cookies and stood a minute, counting the people who were to eat them. Four right here in the kitchen and five—no, six—out-of-doors. Would two dozen cookies be

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enough for ten people? She put her head into the kitchen to ask, but there was no one in sight, so she had to decide the point by herself. After nibbling a crumb she thought not, and added another dozen. And then there was still so much room left that she just filled up the box, regardless. Afterward she was very glad of it. She would n't have supposed it possible for ten people to eat as many cookies as those ten people ate after all the other things they had eaten.

By the time she had finished her calculations with the cookies, Aunt Jessica and Laura and Priscilla were ready. When Elliott emerged from the pantry, the little car was at the kitchen door, with a hamper and two pails of water in it, and on the back seat a long, queer-looking box that Laura told Elliott was a fireless cooker.

"Home-made," said Laura, "you'd know that to look at it, but it works just as well. It's the grandest thing, espe-

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cially when we want to eat out-of-doors. Saves lots of trouble.

Elliott gasped. "You mean you carry it along to cook the dinner in?"

"Why, the dinner's cooking in it now! Hop on, everybody. Mother, you take the wheel. Elliott and I will ride on the steps."

Away they sped, bumpity-bump, to the hay-field, picking up the carrot-hoers as they went. It is astonishing how many people can cling to one little car, when those people are neither very wide nor, some of them, very tall. From the hay-field they nosed their way into a little dell, all ferns and cool white birches, and far above, a canopy of leaf-traceried blue sky. In the next few minutes it became very plain to the new cousin that the Camerons were used to doing this kind of thing. Every one seemed to know exactly what to do. The pails of water were swung to one side; the fireless cooker took

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up its position on a flat gray rock. The hamper yielded loaves of bread—light and dark, that one cut for oneself on a smooth white board—and a basket stocked with plates and cups and knives and forks and spoons. Potted meat and potatoes and two kinds of vegetables, as they were wanted, came from the fireless cooker, all deliciously tender and piping hot. It was like a cafeteria in the open, thought Elliott, except that one had no tray.

And every one laughed and joked and had a good time. Even Elliott had a fairly good time, though she thought it was thoroughly queer. You see, it had never occurred to her that people could pick up their dinner and run out-of-doors into any lovely spot that they came to, to eat it. She was n't at all sure she cared for that way of doing things. But she liked the beauty of the little dell, the ferny smell of it, and the sunshine and cheerfulness. The occasional darning-needles, and small

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green worms, and black or other colored bugs, she enjoyed less. She had n't been accustomed to associate such things with her dinner. But nobody else seemed to mind; perhaps the others were used to taking bugs and worms with their meals. If one appeared, they threw him away and went on eating as though nothing had happened.

And of course it was rather clever of them, the girl reflected, to take a picnic when they could get it. If they had n't done so, she did n't quite see, judging by the portion of a day she had so far observed, how they could have got any picnics at all. The method utilized scraps of time, left-overs and between-times, that were good for little else. It was a rather arresting discovery, to find out that people could divert themselves without giving up their whole time to it. But, after all, it was n't a method for her. She was positive on that point. It seemed the least lit-

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tle bit common, too—such whole-hearted absorption as the Camerons showed in pursuits that were just plain work.

“Stan,” she demanded, late that afternoon, “is there any tennis here?”

“Not so you ’d notice it. What are you thinking of, in war-time, Elliott? Uncle Samuel expects every farmer to do his duty. All the men and older boys around here have either volunteered or been drafted. So we ’re all farmers, especially the girls. *Quod erat demonstrandum*. Savvy?”

“Any luncheons?”

“Meals, Lot, plain meals.”

“Parties?”

Stannard threw up his hands. “Never heard of ’em!”

“Canoeing?”

“No water big enough.”

“I suppose nobody here thinks of motor-ing for pleasure.”

“Never. Too busy.”

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"Or gets an invitation for a spin?"

"You 're behind the times."

"So I see."

"Harry told me that this summer is extra strenuous," Stannard explained; "but they 've always rather gone in for the useful, I take it. Had to, most likely. They 'd be all right, too, if they did n't live so. They 're a good sort, an awfully good sort. But, ginger, how a fellow 'd have to hump to keep up with 'em! I don't try. I do a little, and then sit back and call it done."

If Elliott had n't been so miserable, she would have laughed. Stannard had hit himself off very well, she thought. He had his good points, too. Not once had he reminded her that she had n't intended to spend her summer on a farm. But she was too unhappy to tease him as she might have done at another time. She was still bewildered and inclined to resent the trick life had played her. The prospect did n't

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look any better on close inspection than it had at first; rather worse, if anything. Imagine her, Elliott Cameron pitching hay! Not that any one had asked her to. But how could a person live for six weeks with these people and not do what they did? Such was Elliott's code. Delightful people, too. But she did n't wish to pitch hay and she loathed washing dishes. There was something so messy about dish-washing, ordinary dish-washing; milk-pans were different.

Then suddenly Elliott Cameron did a strange thing. By this time she had shaken off Stannard and had betaken herself and her disgust to the edge of the woods. She was so very miserable that she did n't know herself and she knew herself less than ever in this next act. Alone in the woods, as she thought, with only moss underfoot and high green boughs overhead, Elliott lifted her foot and deliberately and with vehemence stamped it.

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"I don't like things!" she whispered, a little shocked at her own words. "I don't *like* things!"

Then she looked up and met the amused eyes of Bruce Fearing.

For a minute the hot color flooded the girl's face. But she seized the bull by the horns. "I am cross," she said, "frightfully cross!" And she looked so engagingly pretty as she said it that Bruce thought he had never seen so attractive a girl.

"Anything in particular gone wrong with the universe?"

"Everything, with my part of it." What possessed her, she wondered afterward, to say what she said next? "I never wanted to come here."

"That so? We've been thinking it rather nice."

In spite of herself, she was mollified. "It is n't quite that, either," she explained. "I've only just discovered the real trou-

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ble, myself. What makes me so mad is n't altogether the fact that I did n't want to come up here. It's that I had n't any choice. I *had* to come."

The boy's eyes twinkled. "So that's what's bothering you, is it? Cheer up! You had the choice of *how* you'd come, did n't you?"

"How?"

"Yes. Sometimes I think that's all the choice they give us in this world. It's all I've had, anyway—how I'd do a thing."

"You mean, gracefully or—"

"I mean—"

"Hello!" said Stannard's voice. "What are you two chinning about before the cows come home?"

CHAPTER IV

IN UNTRODDEN FIELDS

“**Y**OU don’t want to have much to do with that fellow,” said Stannard, when Bruce Fearing had gone on about whatever business he had in hand.

“Why not?” Elliott’s tone was short. She had wanted to hear what Bruce was going to say.

“Oh, he is all right, enough, I guess, but nobody knows where he came from. He and that Pete brother of his are no relations of ours, or of Aunt Jessica’s either.”

“How does he happen to be living here, then?”

“Search me. Some kind of a pick-up, I gathered. Nobody talks much about it. They take him as a matter of course. All

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right enough for them, if they want to, but they really ought to warn strangers. A fellow would think he was—er—all right, you know.”

Stannard's words made Elliott very uncomfortable. She thought the reason they disquieted her was that she had rather liked Bruce Fearing, and now to have him turn out a person whom she could n't be as friendly with as she wished was disconcerting. It was only another point in her indictment of life on the Cameron farm; one could n't tell whom one was knowing. But she determined to sound Laura, which would be easy enough, and Stannard's charge might prove unfounded.

But sounding Laura was not easy, chiefly for the reason Stannard had shrewdly deduced, that the Robert Camerons took Peter and Bruce Fearing in quite as matter-of-fact a way as they took themselves. Laura even failed to discover that she was being sounded.

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"Who is this 'Pete' you're always talking about?" Elliott asked.

"Bruce's older brother—I almost said ours." The two girls were skimming currants, Laura with the swift skill of accustomed fingers, Elliott more slowly. "He is perfectly fine. I wish you could know him."

"I gathered he was Bruce's brother."

"He's not a bit like Bruce. Pete is short and dark and as quick as a flash. You'd know he would make a splendid aviator. There was a letter in the 'Upton News' last night from an Upton doctor who is over there, attached now to our boys' camp; did you see it? He says Bob and Pete are 'the acknowledged aces' of their squadron. That shows we must have missed some of their letters. The last one from Bob was written just after he had finished his training."

"This—Pete went from here?"

"He and Bob were in Tech together,

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juniors. They enlisted in Boston, and they've kept pretty close tabs on each other ever since. They had their training over here in the same camps. In France, Pete got into spirals first, 'by a fluke,' as he put it; Bob was unlucky with his landings. But, some way or other, Bob seems to have beaten him to the actual fighting. Now they're in it together." And Laura smiled and then sighed, and the nimble fingers stopped work for a minute, only to speed faster than ever.

"I have n't read you any of their letters, have I? Or Sid's either? (Sidney is my twin, you know. He is at Devens.) But I will. If anything, Pete's are funnier than Bob's. Both the boys have an eye to the jolly side of things. Sometimes you would n't think there was anything to flying but a huge lark, by the way they write. But there was one letter of Pete's (it was to Mother), written from their first training-camp in France after

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one of the boys' best friends had been killed. Pete was evidently feeling sober, but oh, so different from the way any one would have felt about such a thing before the war began! There was plenty of fun in the letter, too, but toward the end, Pete told about this Jim Stone's death, and he said: 'It has made us all pretty serious, but nobody's blue. Jim was a splendid fellow, and a chap can't think he has stopped as quick as all that. Mother Jess, do you remember my talking to you one Sunday after church, freshman vacation, about the things I did n't believe in? Why did n't you tell me I was a fool? You knew it then, and I know it now.' That's Pete all over. It made Mother and me very happy."

Elliott felt rather ashamed to continue her probing. "Have they always lived with you," she asked, "the Fearings?"

"Oh, yes, ever since I can remember. Is n't Bruce splendid? I don't know how

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we could have got on at all this summer without Bruce."

Then Elliott gave up. If a mystery existed, either Laura did n't know of it, or she had forgotten it, or else she considered it too negligible to mention.

The girl found that for some reason she did not care to ask Stannard the source of his information. Would Bruce himself prove communicative? There could be no harm in finding out. Besides, it would tease Stannard to see her talking with "that fellow," and Elliott rather enjoyed teasing Stannard. And did n't she owe him something for a dictatorial interruption?

The thing would require manœuvering. You could n't talk to Bruce Fearing, or to any one else up here, whenever you felt like it; he was far too busy. But on the hill at sunset Elliott found her chance.

"I think Aunt Jessica," she remarked,

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"is the most wonderful woman I've ever seen."

A glow lit up Bruce's quiet gray eyes. "Mother Jess," he said, "is a miracle."

"She is so terrifically busy, and yet she never seems to hurry; and she always has time to talk to you and she never acts tired."

"She is, though."

"I suppose she must be, sometimes. I like that name for her, 'Mother Jess.' Your—aunt, is she?"

"Oh, no," said Bruce, simply. "I've no Cameron or Fordyce blood in me, or any other pedigreed variety. My corpuscles are unregistered. She and Father Bob took Pete and me in when I was a baby and Pete was a mere toddler. I was born in the hotel down in the town there,—Am I boring you?"

"No, indeed!" Elliott had the grace to blush at the ease with which she was carrying on her investigation.

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He wondered why she flushed, but went on quietly. "Our own mother died there in the hotel when I was a week old and we did n't seem to have any kin. At least, they never showed up. Mother was evidently a widow; Mother Jess got that from her belongings. She stopped overnight at Highboro, and I was born there. She had n't told any one in the hotel where she was going. Registered from Boston, but nobody could be found in Boston who knew of her. The authorities were going to send Pete and me to some kind of a capitalized Home, when Mother Jess stepped in. She had n't enough boys, so she said. Bob and Laura and Sid were on deck. Henry and Tom came along later. For-dyce was the one that died; he'd just slipped out. Mother Jess was feeling lonely, I guess. Anyway, she took us two; said she thought we'd be better off on the farm than in a Home and she needed us—bless her! Do you wonder

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Pete and I swear by the Camerons?"

"No," said Elliott. "Indeed I don't." She had what she had been angling for, in good measure, but she rather wished she had n't got it, after all. "Have n't you had any clue in all these years as to who your people were?"

"Not the slightest. I'm willing to let things rest as they are."

"Yes, of course," thought Elliott, "but—" She let it go at "but." Ought n't somebody, as Stannard said, to have warned her? These boys' people might have been very common persons, not at all like Camerons. The fact that no relatives appeared proved that, did n't it? Every one who was any one at all had a family. Bruce did not look common: his gray eyes and his broad forehead and his keen, thin face were almost distinguished, and his manners were above criticism. But one never could tell. And had n't he been brought up by Camerons? The very

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openness with which he had told his story had something fine about it. He, like Laura, seemed to see nothing in it to conceal.

Well, was there? Elliott could quite clearly imagine what Aunt Margaret, Stannard's mother, would say to that question. She had never especially cared for Aunt Margaret. As Elliott looked at Bruce Fearing, one of the pillars of her familiar world began to totter. Actually, she could think of no particularly good reason why, when she had heard his story, she should proceed to shun him. His history simply did n't seem to matter, except to make her sorry for him; and yet she could n't be really sorry for a boy who had been brought up by Aunt Jessica.

Perhaps the Cameron Farm atmosphere was already beginning to work.

"I think you and your brother had luck," she said.

"I know we did," answered Bruce.

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Elliott turned the conversation. "I wish you could tell me what you were going to say, when we were interrupted yesterday, about a person's having no choice except how he will do things—you having had only that kind of choice."

"I remember," said Bruce. "Well, for one thing, I suppose I could get grouchy, if I chose, over not knowing who my people were."

"They may have been very splendid," said Elliott.

Bruce smiled. "It's not likely."

"In that case," she countered, "you have the satisfaction of *not* knowing who they were."

"Exactly. But that's rather a crawl, is n't it? Of course, a fellow would like to know."

The boy bent forward, and, with painstaking care, selected a blade from a tuft of grass growing between his feet. He nibbled a minute before he spoke again.

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"See here, I'm going to tell you something I have n't told a soul. I'm crazy to go to the war. Sometimes it seems as though I could n't stay home. When Pete's letters come I have to go away somewhere quick and chop wood! Anything to get busy for a while."

"Are n't you too young? Would they take you?"

"Take me? You bet they'd take me! I'm eighteen. Don't I look twenty?"

The girl's eye ran critically over the strong young body, with its long, supple, sinewy lines. "Yes," she nodded. "I think you do."

"They'd take me in a minute, in aviation or anything else."

"Then why don't you?"

"Who'd help Father Bob through the farm stunts? Young Bob's gone, and Pete and Sidney. They were always here for the summer work. Henry's a fine lad,

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but a boy still. Tom's nothing but a boy, though he does his bit. As for the Women's Land Army, it's got up into these parts, but not in force. Father Bob can't hire help: it's not to be had. That's why Mother Jess and the girls are going in so for farm work. They never did it before this year, except in sport. We have more land under cultivation this summer than ever before, and fewer hands to harvest it with. But Mother and the girls sha'n't have to work harder than they're doing now, if I can help it. Could I go off and leave them, after all they've done for me? But that's not it, either—gratitude. They're mine, Father Bob and Mother Jess are, and the rest; they're my folks. You're not exactly grateful to your own folks, you know. They belong to you. And you don't leave what belongs to you in the lurch."

"No," said Elliott. With awakened

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eyes she was watching Bruce. No boy had ever talked of such things to her before. "So you're not going?"

"Not of my own will. Of course, if the war lasts and I'm drafted, or the help problem lightens up, it will be different. Pete's gone. It was Pete's right to go. He's the elder."

"But you *are* choosing," Elliott cried earnestly. "Don't you see? You're choosing to stay at home and—" words came swiftly into her memory—"fight it out on these lines all summer.'"

Bruce's smile showed that he recognized her quotation, but he shook his head. "Choosing? I haven't any choice—except being decent about it. Don't *you* see I can't go? I can only try to keep from thinking about not going."

"You being you," said the girl, and she spoke as simply and soberly as Bruce himself, though her own warmth surprised her, "I see you can't go. But was that all

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you meant"—her voice grew ludicrously disappointed—"by a person's having a choice only of how he will do a thing? There's nothing to that but making the best of things!"

Bruce Fearing threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"You're the funniest girl I've ever seen."

"Then you can't have seen many. But is there?"

"Perhaps not. Stupid, is n't it?"

"Yes," she nodded, "I'm afraid it is. And frightfully old. I was hoping you were going to tell me something new and exciting."

The boy chuckled again. "Nothing so good as that. Besides, I've a hunch the exciting things are n't very new, after all."

Elliott went to sleep that night, if not any happier, at least more interested. She had looked deep into the heart of a boy, different, it appeared, from any boy that

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she had ever known; and something loyal and sturdy and tender she had seen there had stirred her. It was odd how well acquainted she felt with him; odd, too, how curious she was to know him better, even though he had n't the least idea who his grandfather had been. "Bother his grandfather!" Elliott chuckled to realize how such a sentiment would horrify Aunt Margaret. Grandfathers were very important to Aunt Margaret and Aunt Margaret's children. Grandfathers had always seemed fairly important to Elliott herself until now. Was it their relative unimportance in the Robert Camerons' estimation, or a pair of steady gray eyes, that had altered her valuation? The girl did n't know and she was keen enough to know that she did n't; keen enough, too, to perceive that the change in her estimation of grandfathers applied to a single case only and might be merely temporary.

However that might be, she was not

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ready yet to do anything so inherently distasteful as make the best of what she did n't like, especially when nobody but herself and two boys would know it. When one makes the best of things, one likes to do it to crowded galleries, that perceive what is going on and applaud. The Robert Camerons, Elliott was quite sure, would n't applaud. They would take it as a matter of course, just as they took her as a matter of course. They were quite charming about it, as delightful hosts as one could wish—if only they lived differently!—but Elliott was n't used to being taken for granted. She might have been these new cousins' own sort, for any difference she could detect in their actions. They did n't seem to begin to understand her importance. Perhaps she was n't so important, after all. The doubt had never before entered her mind.

The fact was, of course, that among these busy, efficient people she was feel-

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ing quite useless; and she did n't like to appear incompetent when she knew herself to be, in her own line, a thoroughly able person. But it irked her to think that she had been forced into a position where in self-defense she must either acquire a kind of efficiency she did n't want or do without. At the same time it troubled her lest this reluctance become apparent. For they were all loves and she would n't hurt their feelings for worlds. And she did wish them to admire her. But she had a feeling that they did n't altogether, not even Priscilla and Bruce.

Nevertheless, the next day when Laura asked whether she would take her book out to the hay-field or stay where she was on the porch, Elliott looked up from "Lorna Doone" and said, with the prettiest little coaxing air, "If I go, will you let me pitch hay?" And Laura answered as lightly, "Certainly." "I don't believe you," said

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Elliott. "You may ride on the hay-load," smiled Laura. "That won't do at all," Elliott shook her head. "If I can't pitch hay, I'll stay here." Laura laughed and said: "You certainly will be more comfortable here. I can't quite see you pitching hay." And Elliott retorted: "You don't know what I could do, if I tried. But since you won't let me try—"

It was all smiling and gay, but it was a crawl, and Elliott knew it and knew that Laura knew it, and she felt ashamed. Wasn't Stannard's frank shirking better than her camouflaged variety? But hadn't she picked berries all the morning in a stuffy sunbonnet under a broiling sun, until she felt as red as a berry and much less fresh and sweet?

"It's a shame," said Laura, "that this is just our busy season; but you know you have to make hay while the sun shines. Father thinks we can finish the lower

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meadows to-day. Then to-morrow we begin cutting on the hill. It's really fun to ride the hay-rake. I mostly drive the rake, though now and then I pitch for variety."

She looked so strong and brown and merry, as she talked, that Elliott, comfortably established with "Lorna Doone," felt almost like flinging her book into the next chair, slipping her arm through Laura's, and crying, "Lead on!" But she remembered just in time that, as she had n't wished to come to the Cameron Farm, it would ill become her to have a good time there. Which may seem like a childish way of looking at the thing, but is n't really confined to children at all.

So the hay-makers tramped away down the road, their laughter floating cheerfully back over their shoulders; and Elliott sat on the big shady veranda and read her book.

She might have enjoyed it less had she

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heard Henry's frank summary at the turn of the lane, when his father inquired the whereabouts of Stannard.

"Beau Brummell hiked over to Upton half an hour ago. I offered him the other Henry, but he does n't seem to care to drive anything short of a Pierce-Arrow. Twins, are n't they?" and Henry nodded in the direction of the veranda.

"Sh-h!" reproved Laura. "They're our guests."

"Guests is just it. Yes, they're *guests*, all right."

"Mother says they don't know how to work," Priscilla observed.

"That's another true word, too."

Mother turned gaily in the road ahead. "Who is talking about me?" she called.

Priscilla frisked on to join her, and Henry fell back to a confidential exchange with Laura. "Beau would n't be so bad if he could forget for a minute that he owned the earth and had a mortgage on the solar

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system. But when he tries to snub Bruce—gee, that gets me!”

“Are n’t you twanging the G string rather often lately, Hal?—Stannard can’t snub Bruce. Bruce is n’t the kind of fellow to be snubbed.”

“Just the same, it makes me sick to think anybody’s a cousin to me that would try it.”

Laura switched back to the main subject. “We did n’t ask them up here as extra farm hands, you know.”

“Bull’s-eye,” said Henry, and grinned.

What she did not know failed to trouble Elliott. She read on in lonely peace through the afternoon. At a most exciting point the telephone rang. Four, that was the Cameron call. Elliott went into the house and took down the receiver.

“Mr. Robert Cameron’s,” she said pleasantly.

“S-say!” stuttered a high, sharp voice, “my little b-b-boys have let your c-c-cows

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out o' the p-p-pasture. I 'll g-give 'em a t-t-trouncin', but 't won't git your c-c-cows back. They let 'em out the G-G-Garrett Road, and your medder gate 's open. Jim B-B-Blake saw it this mornin'! Why the man did n't shut it, I d-d-dunno. You 'll have to hurry to save your medder."

"But," gasped Elliott, "I don't understand! You say the cows—"

"Are comin' down G-Garrett Road," snapped the stuttering voice, "the whole kit an' b-b-bilin' of 'em. They 'll be inter your upper m-medder in five m-m-minutes."

Over the wire came the click of a receiver snapping back on its hook. Elliott hung up and started toward the door. The cows had been let out. Just why this incident was so disastrous she did not quite comprehend, but she must go and tell her uncle. Before her feet touched the veranda, however, she stopped. Five minutes? Why, there would n't be time to

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go to the lower meadow, to say nothing of any one's doing anything about the situation.

And then, with breath-taking suddenness, the thing burst on her. She was alone in the house; even Aunt Jessica and Priscilla had gone to the hay-field. The situation, whatever it was, was up to her.

For a minute the girl leaned weakly against the wall. Cows—there were thirty in the herd—and she loathed cows! She was afraid of cows. She knew nothing about cows. She was never in the slightest degree sure of what the creatures might take it into their heads to do. For a minute she stood irresolute. Then something stirred in the girl, something self-reliant and strong. Never in her life had Elliott Cameron had to do alone anything that she did n't already know how to do. Now for the first time she faced an emergency on none but her own resources,

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an emergency that was quite out of her line.

Her brain worked swiftly as her feet moved to the door. In reality, she had wavered only a second. When Tom went for the cows, did n't he take old Prince? There was just a chance that Prince was n't in the hay-field. She ran down the steps calling, "Prince! Prince!" The old dog rose deliberately from his place on the shady side of the barn and trotted toward her, wagging his tail. "Come, Prince!" cried Elliott, and ran out of the yard.

Luckily, berrying had that very morning taken her by a short cut to the vicinity of the upper meadow. She knew the way. But what was likely to happen? Town-bred girl that she was, she had no idea. A recollection of the smooth, up-standing expanse of the upper meadow gave her a clue. If the cows got into that

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even erectness— She began to run, Prince bounding beside her, his brown tail a waving plume.

She could see the meadow now, a smooth green sea ruffled by nothing heavier than the light feet of the summer breeze. She could see the great gate invitingly open to the road and oh!—her heart stopped beating, then pounded on at a suffocating pace—she could see the cows! There they came, down the hill, quite filling the narrow roadway with their horrid bulk, making it look like a moving river of broad backs and tossing heads. What could she do, the girl wondered; what could she do against so many? She tried to run faster. Somehow she must reach the gate first. There was nothing even then, so far as she knew, to prevent their trampling her down and rushing over her into the waving greenness, unless she could slam the gate in their faces. You can see that she really did not know much about cows.

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But Prince knew them. Prince understood now why his master's guest had summoned him to this hot run in the sunshine. The prospect did not daunt Prince. He ran barking to the meadow side of the road. The foremost cow which, grazing the dusty grass, had strayed toward the gate, turned back into the ruts again. Elliott pulled the gate shut, in her haste leaving herself outside. There, too spent to climb over, she flattened her slender form against the gray boards, while, driven by Prince, the whole herd, horns tossing, tails switching, flanks heaving, thudded its way past.

And there, three minutes later, Bruce, dashing over the hill in response to a message relayed by telephone and boy to the lower meadow, found her.

"The cows have gone down," Elliott told him. "Prince has them. He will take them home, won't he?"

"Prince? Good enough! He'll get the

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cows home all right. But what are you doing in this mix-up?"

"A woman telephoned the house," said Elliott. "I was afraid I could n't reach any of you in time, so I came over myself."

"You like cows?" The question shot at her like a bullet.

The piquant nose wrinkled entrancingly. "Scared to death of 'em."

"I guessed as much." The boy nodded. "Gee whiz, but you've got good stuff in you!"

And though her shoes were dusty and her hair tousled, and though her knees had n't stopped shaking even yet, Elliott Cameron felt a sudden sense of satisfaction and pride. She turned and looked over the fence at the meadow. In its unmarred beauty it seemed to belong to her.

CHAPTER V

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“**I** THINK,” remarked Elliott, the next morning, “that I will walk up and watch the haying for a while.”

She had finished washing the separator and the milk-pans. It had taken a full hour the first morning; growing expertness had already reduced the hour to three-quarters, and she had hopes of further reductions. She still held firmly to the opinion that the process was uninteresting, but an innate sense of fairness told her that the milk-pans were no more than her share. Of course, she could n't spend six weeks in a household whose component members were as busy as were this household's members, and do nothing at all.

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That was the disadvantage in coming to the place. She was bound to dissemble her feelings and wash milk-pans. But if she had to wash them, she might as well do it well. There was no question about that. If the actual process still bored the girl, the results did not. Elliott was proud of her pans, with a pride in which there was no atom of indifference. She scoured them until they shone, not because, as she told herself, she liked to scour, but because she liked to see the pans shine.

Aunt Jessica liked to see them shine, too. She paused on her way through the kitchen. "What beautiful pans! I can see my face in every one of them."

A glow of elation struck through Elliott. Aunt Jessica was loving and sweet, but she did not lavish commendation in quarters where it was not due. Elliott knew her pans were beautiful, but Aunt Jessica's praise made them doubly so.

It was then, as she hung up her towels,

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that she made the remark about walking up to the hill meadow. She had a notion she would like to see the knives put into that unbroken expanse of tall grass for which she continued to feel a curious responsibility. A mere appearance at the field could not commit her to anything.

"If you are going up," said Aunt Jessica, "perhaps you will take some of these cookies I have just baked. Gertrude has made lemonade."

That was one of the delightful things about Aunt Jessica, Elliott thought: she never probed beneath the surface of one's words, she never even looked curiosity, and she gave one immediately a reason for doing what one wished to do. Lemonade and cookies made an appearance in the hay-field the most natural thing in the world.

The upper meadow proved a surprise. Not its business—Elliott had expected business, but its odd mingling of jollity

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with activity. They all seemed to be having such a good time about their work. And yet the jollity did not in the least interfere with the business, which appeared to be going forward in a systematic and efficient way that even an untrained girl could not fail to notice. Elliott's advent would have occasioned little disturbance, she suspected, had it not been for the cookies. She was used by now to having no fuss made over her. Laura waved a hand from her seat behind the horses; the boys swung their hats; Priscilla darted over to display a ground-sparrow's nest that the scythes had disclosed.

It was Priscilla who discovered the cookies and sent a squeal of delight across the meadow. But even then the workers did not pause. Priscilla had to dance out across the mown grass and squeal again and wave both hands, a cookie in one, a cup in the other, and add a shrill little yelp, "Come on! Come on, peoples! You

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don't know what we 've got here," before they straggled over to what Henry called "the refreshment booth."

Then they were ready enough to notice Elliott. Uncle Robert and the boys cracked jokes, the girls chattered and laughed, and every one called on her to applaud the amount of work they had already accomplished, exactly as though she understood about such things.

And Elliott did applaud, reinforcing her words with a whole battery of dimples, all the while privately resolving that no contagion of enthusiasm should inoculate her with the haymaking germ. There were factors that made it all a bit hard to withstand; the sky was so blue, the breeze was so jolly, the mown grass smelled so delicious, and the mountain air had such zest in it. But, on the other hand, the sun was hot and downright and freckling; Priscilla's tip-tilted little nose was already liberally besprinkled. If Laura had n't such

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a wonderful skin, she would have been a sight long ago, despite the wide brim of her big straw hat. A mere farm hat, and Laura looked like a mere husky farm girl, as she guided her horses skilfully around the field. How strong her arms must be! But how could a girl with Laura's intelligence and high spirit and charm enjoy putting all this time into haying? With Priscilla, of course, matters stood differently. Children never discriminate.

"No, I sha'n't do that kind of thing," said Elliott, firmly. But she would investigate the haymaking game, investigate it coolly and dispassionately, to find out exactly what it amounted to—aside, of course, from an accumulation of dried grass in barns. To this end, she invaded the upper meadow a good many times, during the next few days, took a turn on the hay-rake, now and then helped load and unload, riding down to the barn on a mound of high-piled fragrance, and came

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to the conclusion that, as an activity, hay-making was n't to be compared with knocking a ball back and forth across a net. To try one's hand at it might do well enough, now and then, to spice an otherwise luxurious life, but as a steady diet the thing was too unrelenting. One was driven by wind and sun; even the clouds took a hand in cudgeling one on. A person must keep at it whether she cared to or not—in actual practice this point never troubled Elliott, who always stopped when she wished to—there were no spectators, and, heaviest demerit of all, it was undeniably hard work.

But she was curious to discover what Laura found in it, and you know Elliott Cameron well enough by this time to understand that she was not a girl who hesitated to ask for information.

The last load had dashed into the big red barn two minutes before a thunder-shower, and Laura, freshly tubbed and laundered, was winding her long black

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braids around her shapely little head. Elliott sat on the bed and watched her.

"Are n't you glad it 's done?" she asked.

"The haying? Oh, yes, I 'm always glad when we have it safely in. But I love it."

"Really? It is n't work for girls."

"No? Then once a year I 'll take a vacation from being a girl. But that does n't hold now, you know. Everything is work for girls that girls can do, to help win this war."

"To help win the war?" echoed Elliott, and blankly and suddenly shut her mouth. Why, she supposed it did help, after all! But it was their work, the kind of thing they had always done, up here at the Cameron Farm; only, as Bruce had assured her, the girls had n't done much of it. Was that what Bruce had meant, too?

"Why did you suppose we put so much more land under cultivation this year than we ever had before, with less help in sight?" Laura questioned. "Just for fun,

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or for the money we could get out of it?"

"I had n't thought much about it," said Elliott. She was thinking now. Had she been a bit of a slacker? She loathed slackers.

"I never thought of it as war work," she said. "Stupid, was n't I?"

Laura put the last hair-pin in place. "Just thought of it as our job, did you? So it is, of course. But when your job happens to be war work too—well, you just buckle down to it extra hard. I've never been so thankful as this year and last that we have the farm. It gives every one of us such a splendid chance to feel we're really counting in this fight—the boys over there and in camp, the rest of us here." Laura's dark eyes were beginning to shine. "Oh, I would n't be anywhere but on a farm for anything in the wide world, unless, perhaps, somewhere in France!"

She stopped suddenly, put down the

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hand-mirror with which she was surveying her back hair, and blushed. "There!" she said, "I forgot all about the fact that you were n't born on a farm, too. But then, you can share ours for a year, so I'm not going to apologize for a word I've said, even if I have been bragging because I'm so lucky."

Bragging because she was lucky! And Laura meant it. There was not the ghost of a pose in her frank, downright young pride. Her cousin felt like a person who has been walking down-stairs and tries to step off a tread that is n't there. Elliott's own cheeks reddened as she thought of the patronizing pity she had felt. Luckily, Laura had n't seemed to notice it. And Laura was quick to see things, too. Elliott realized, with a little stab of chagrin, that Laura would n't understand why her cousin had pitied her, even if some one should be at pains to explain the fact to her.

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But Elliott could n't let herself pass as an intentional slacker.

"We girls did canteening at home; surgical dressings and knitting, too, of course, but canteening was the most fun."

"That must have been fine." Laura was interested at once.

Elliott's spirit revived. After all, Laura was a country girl. "Do you have a canteen here?"

"Oh, no, Highboro is n't big enough. No trains stop here for more than a minute. We're not on the direct line to any of the camps, either."

"Ours was a regular canteen," said Elliott. "They would telephone us when soldiers were going through, and we would go down, with Mrs. Royce or Aunt Margaret or some other chaperon, and distribute post-cards and cigarettes and sweet chocolate; and ice-cream cones, if the weather was hot. It was such fun to talk to the men!"

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"Ice-cream and cigarettes!" laughed Laura. "I should think they 'd have liked something nourishing."

"Oh, they got the nourishing things, if it was time. The Government had an arrangement with a restaurant just around the corner to serve soldiers' meals. We did n't have to do that."

"You supplied the frills."

"Yes." Somehow Elliott did not quite like the words.

Laura was quick to notice her discomfiture. "I imagine they needed the frills and the jollying, poor lonesome boys! They 're so young, many of them, and not used to being away from home; and the life is strange, however well they may like it."

"Yes," said Elliott. "More than one bunch told us they had n't seen anything to equal what we did for them this side of New York. Our uniforms were so becoming, too; even a plain girl looked cute

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in those caps. Why, Laura, you might have a uniform, might n't you, if it 's war work?"

"What should I want of a uniform?"

"People who saw you would know what you 're doing."

"They know now, if they open their eyes."

"They 'd know why, I mean—that it 's war work."

"Mercy! Nobody around here needs to be told why a person hoes potatoes these days. They 're all doing it."

"Do you hoe potatoes?" Elliott had no notion how comically her consternation sat on her pretty features.

Laura laughed at the amazed face of her cousin. "Of course I do, when potatoes need hoeing."

"But do you like it?"

"Oh, yes, in a way. Hoeing potatoes is n't half bad."

Elliott opened her lips to say that it

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was n't girls' work, remembered that she had made that remark once before, and changed to, "It is hard work, and it is n't a bit interesting."

Then Laura asked two questions that left Elliott gasping. "Don't you like to do anything except what is easy? Though I don't know that it is any harder to hoe potatoes for an hour than to play tennis that length of time. And anything is interesting, don't you think, that has to be done?"

"Goodness, *no!*" ejaculated Elliott, when she found her voice. "I don't think that at all! Do you, really?"

"Why, yes!" Laura laughed a trifle deprecatingly. "I'm not bluffing. I never thought I'd care to spray potatoes, but one day it had to be done, and Father and the boys were needed for something else. It was n't any harder to do than churning, and I found it rather fun to watch the potato-bugs drop off. I calculated, too, how many Belgians the potatoes

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in those hills would feed, either directly or by setting wheat free, you know. I forget now how many I made it. I know I felt quite exhilarated when I was through. Trudy helped."

"Goodness!" murmured Elliott faintly. For a minute she could find no other words. Then she managed to remark: "Of course every one gardens at home. They have lots at the country club, and raise potatoes and things, and you hear them talking everywhere about bugs and blight and cold pack. I never paid much attention. It did n't seem to be meant for girls. The men and boys raise the things and the wives and mothers can them. That 's the way we do at home."

"Traditional," nodded Laura. "We divide on those lines here to a certain extent, too; but we're rather Jacks of all trades on this farm. The boys know how to can and we girls to make hay."

"The boys *can*?"

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"Tom put up all our string-beans last summer quite by himself. What does it matter who does a thing, so it's done?"

Laura was dressed now, from the crown of her smooth black head to the tip of her white canvas shoes, and a very satisfactory operation she had made of it. Elliott dismissed Laura's last remark, which had not sounded very sensible to her—of course it mattered who did things; why, that sometimes was all that did matter!—and reflected that, country bred though she was, her cousin Laura had an air that many a town girl might have envied. An ability to find hard manual work interesting did not seem to preclude the knowledge of how to put on one's clothes.

But Laura's hands were not all that hands should be, by Elliott's standard; they were well cared for, and as white as soap and water could make them, but there are some things that soap and water can-

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not do when it is pitted against sun and wind and contact with soil and berries and fruits. Elliott had n't meant to look so fixedly at Laura's hands as to make her thought visible, and the color rose in her cheeks when Laura said, exactly as though she were a mind-reader, "If you prefer lily-white fingers to stirring around doing things, why, you have to sit in a corner and keep them lily-white. I like to stick mine into too many pies ever to have them look well."

"They're a lovely shape," said Elliott, seriously.

And then, to her amazement, Laura laughed and leaned over and hugged her. "And you're a dear thing, even if you do think my hands are no lady's!"

Of course Elliott protested; but as that was just what she did think, her protestations were not very convincing.

"You can't have everything," said Laura, quite as though she did n't mind in

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the least what her hands looked like. The strangest part of it all was that Elliott believed Laura actually did n't mind.

But she did n't know how to answer her, Laura's words had raised the dust on all those comfortable cushiony notions Elliott had had sitting about in her mind for so long that she supposed they were her very own opinions. Until the dust settled she could n't tell what she thought, whether they belonged to her or had simply been dumped on her by other people. She could n't remember ever having been in such a position before.

Yes, Elliott found a good deal to think of. One had to draw the line somewhere; she had told herself comfortably; but lines seemed to be very queerly jumbled up in this war. If a person could n't canteen or help at a hostess house or do surgical dressings or any of the other things that had always stood in her mind for girl's war work, she had to do what she could,

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had n't she? And if it was n't necessary to be tagged, why, it was n't. Laura in blouse and short skirt, or even in overalls, seemed to accomplish as much as any possible Laura in a pantaloon suit or puttees or any other land uniform. There really did n't seem any way out, now that Elliott understood the matter. Perhaps she had been rather dense not to understand it before.

"What would you like me to do this morning, Uncle?" she asked the next day at the breakfast-table. "I think it is time I went to work."

"Going to join the farmerettes?"

"Thinking of it." She could feel, without seeing, Stannard's stare of astonishment. No one else gave signs of surprise. Stannard, thought the girl, really had n't as good manners as his cousins.

Uncle Bob surveyed the trim figure, arrayed in its dark smock and the shortest of all Elliott's short skirts. If he felt other

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than wholly serious he concealed the fact well.

"The corn needs hoeing, both field-corn and garden-corn. How about joining that squad?"

"It suits me."

Corn—did n't Hoover urge people to eat corn? In helping the corn crop, she too might feel herself feeding the Belgians.

Gertrude linked her arm in her slender cousin's as they left the table. "I 'll show you where the tools are," she said. "Harry runs the cultivator in the field, but we use hand-hoes in the garden."

"You will have to show me more than that," said Elliott. "What does hoeing do to corn, anyhow?"

"Keeps down the weeds that eat up the nourishment in the soil," recited Gertrude glibly, "and by stirring up the ground keeps in the moisture. You like to know the reason for things, too, don't you? I'm glad. I always do."

A SLACKER UNPERCEIVED

It was n't half bad, with a hoe over her shoulder, in company with other boys and girls, to swing through the dewy morning to the garden. Priscilla had joined the squad when she heard Elliott was to be in it, and with Stannard and Tom the three girls made a little procession. It proved a simple enough matter to wield a hoe. Elliott watched the others for a few minutes, and if her hills did not take on as workmanlike an appearance as Tom's and Gertrude's, or even as Priscilla's, they all assured her practice would mend the fault.

"You'll do it all right," Priscilla encouraged her.

"Sure thing!" said Tom. "We might have a race and see who gets his row done first."

"No races for me, yet," said Elliott. "It would be altogether too tame. I'd qualify for the booby prize without trying. But the rest of you may race, if you want to."

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"Just wait!" prophesied Stannard darkly. "Wait an hour or two and see how you like hoeing."

Elliott laughed. In the cool morning, with the hoe fresh in her hand, she thought of fatigue as something very far away. Stan was always a little inclined to croak. The thing was easy enough.

"Run along, little boy, to your row," she admonished him. "Can't you see that I'm busy?"

Elliott hoed briskly, if a bit awkwardly, and painstakingly removed every weed. The freshly stirred earth looked dark and pleasant; the odor of it was good, too. She compared what she had done with what she had n't, and the contrast moved her to new activity. But after a time—it was not such a long time, either, though it seemed hours—she thought it would be pleasant to stop. The motion of the hoe was monotonous. She straightened up and leaned on the handle and surveyed her

A SLACKER UNPERCEIVED

fellow-workers. Their backs looked very industrious as they bent at varying distances across the garden. Even Stannard had left her behind.

Gertrude abandoned her row and came and inspected Elliott's. "That looks fine," she said, "for a beginner. You must stop and rest whenever you're tired. Mother always tells us to begin a thing easy, not to tire ourselves too much at first. She won't let us girls work when the sun's too hot, either."

Elliott forced a smile. If she had done what she wished to, she would have thrown down her hoe and walked off the field. But for the first time in her life she didn't feel quite like letting herself do what she wished to.

What would these new cousins think of her if she abandoned a task as abruptly as that? But what good did her hoeing do?—a few scratches on the border of this big garden-patch. It couldn't matter to the

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Belgians or the Germans or Hoover or anybody else whether she hoed or did n't hoe. Perhaps, if every one said that, even of garden-patches—but not every one would say it. Some people knew how to hoe. Presumably some people liked hoeing. Goodness, how long this row was! Would she ever, *ever* reach the end?

Priscilla bobbed up, a moist, flushed Priscilla. "That looks nice. You haven't got very far yet, have you? Never mind. Things go a lot faster after you've done 'em a while. Why, when I first tried to play the piano, my fingers went so slow, they just made me ache. Now they skip along real quick."

Elliott leaned on her hoe. "Do you play the piano?"

"Oh, yes! Mother taught me. Good-by. I must get back to my row."

"Do you like hoeing?" Elliott called after her.

A SLACKER UNPERCEIVED

"I like to get it done." The small figure skipped nimbly away.

" 'Get it done!' " Elliott addressed the next clump of waving green blades, pessimism in her voice. "After one row, is n't there another, and another, and *another*, forever?" She slashed into a mat of chickweed with venom.

"I knew you'd get tired," said Stannard, at her elbow. "Come on over to those trees and rest a bit. Sun's getting hot here."

Elliott looked at the clump of trees on the edge of the field. Their shade invited like a beckoning hand. Little beads of perspiration stood on her forehead. A warm lassitude spread through her body, turning her muscles slack. Had n't Gertrude said Aunt Jessica did n't let them work in too hot a sun?

"You're tired; quit it!" urged Stannard.

"Not just yet," said Elliott, and her hoe bit at the ground again.

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Tired? She should think she was tired! And she had fully intended to go with Stan. Then why had n't she gone? The question puzzled the girl. Quit when you like and make it up with cajolery was a motto that Elliott had found very useful. She was good at cajolery. What made her hesitate to try it now?

She swung around, half minded to call Stannard back, when a sentence flashed into her mind, not a whole sentence, just a fragment salvaged from a book some one had once been reading in her hearing: "This war will be won by tired men who—" She could n't quite get the rest. An impression persisted of keeping everlastingly at it, but the words escaped her. She swung back, her hail unsent. Well, she was tired, dead tired, and her back was broken and her hands were blistered, or going to be, but nobody would think of saying that that had anything to do with winning the war. Stay; would n't they?

A SLACKER UNPERCEIVED

It seemed absurd; but, still, what made people harp so on food if there were n't something in it? If all they said was true, why—and Elliott's tired back straightened—why, she was helping a little bit; or she would be if she did n't quit.

It may seem absurd that it had taken a backache to make Elliott visualize what her cousins were really doing on their farm. She ought, of course, to have been able to see it quite clearly while she sat on the veranda, but that is n't always the way things work. Now she seemed to see the farm as part of a great fourth line of defense, a trench that was feeling all the other trenches and all the armies in the open and all the people behind the armies, a line whose success was indispensable to victory, whose defeat would spell failure everywhere. It was only for a minute that she saw this quite clearly, with a kind of illuminated insight that made her backache well worth while. Then the minute

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passed, and as Elliott bent to her hoe again she was aware only of a suspicion that possibly when one was having the most fun was not always when one was being the most useful.

"Well," said a pleasant voice, "how does the hoeing go?"

And there stood Laura with a pitcher in her hand, and on her face a look—was it of mingled surprise and respect?

"You must n't work too long the first day," she told Elliott. "You're not hardened to it yet, as we are. Take a rest now and try it again later on. I have your book under my arm."

When, that noon, they all trooped up to the house, hot and hungry, Elliott went with them, hot and hungry, too. Nobody thanked her for anything, and she did n't even notice the lack. Farming was n't like canteening, where one expected thanks. As she scrubbed her hands she noticed that her nails were hopeless, but her attention

A SLACKER UNPERCEIVED

failed to concentrate on their demoralized state. Had n't she finished her row?

"Stuck it out, did you?" said Bruce, as they sat down at dinner. "I bet you would."

"I should n't have dared look any of you in the face again, if I had n't," smiled Elliott. But his words rang warm in her ears.

CHAPTER VI

FLIERS

LAURA and Elliott were in the summer kitchen, filling glass jars with raspberries. As they finished filling each jar, they capped it and lowered it into a wash-boiler of hot water on the stove.

"It seems odd," remarked Laura, "to put up berries without sugar."

"Is n't it horrid," said Elliott, who had never put up berries at all, but who was longing for candy and had n't had courage to suggest buying any. "I hope the Allies are going to appreciate all we are doing for them."

"Do you?" Laura looked at her oddly. "I hope we are going to appreciate all they have done for us."

"Are n't we showing it?" Elliott felt

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really indignant at her cousin. "Think of the sacrifices we 're making for them."

"Sacrifices?"

How stupid Laura was! "You know as well as I do how many things we are giving up."

"Sugar, for instance?" queried Laura.

"Sugar is one thing."

"Oh, well," said Laura, "I 'd rather a little Belgian had my extra pounds, poor scrap! Of course, now and then I get hungry for it, though Mother gives us all the maple we want, but when I do get hungry, I think about the Belgians and the people of northern France who have lost their homes, and of all those children over there who have n't enough to eat to make them want to play; and I think about the British fleet and what it has kept us from for four years; and about the thousands of girls who have given their youth and prettiness to making munitions. I think about things like that and then I say

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to myself, 'My goodness, what is a little sugar, more or less!' Why, Elliott, we don't begin to feel the war over here, not as they feel it!"

Elliott, who considered that she felt the war a good deal, demurred. "I have lost my home," she said, feeling a little ashamed of the words as she said them.

"But it is there," objected Laura. "Your home is all ready to go back to, is n't it? That's my point."

"And there's Father," said Elliott.

"I know, and my brothers. But I don't feel that *I* have done anything in their being in the army. It is doing them lots of good: every letter shows that. And, anyway, I'd be ashamed if they did n't go."

"Something might happen," said Elliott. "What would you say then?"

"The same, I hope. But what I mean is, the war does n't really touch us in the routine of our every-day living. *We* don't

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have to darken our windows at night and take, every now and then, to the cellars. The machinery of our lives is n't thrown out of gear. We don't live hand in hand with danger. But lots of us think we're killed if we have to use our brains a little, if we're asked to substitute for wheat flour, and can't have thick frosting on our cake and eat meat three times a day. Oh, I've heard 'em talk! Why, our life over here is n't really topsyturvy a bit!"

"Is n't it?" There were things, Elliott thought, that Laura, wise as she was, did n't know.

"We're inconvenienced," said Laura, "but not hurt."

Elliott was silent. She was trying to decide whether or not she was hurt. Inconvenienced seemed rather a slim verb for what had happened to her. But she did n't go on to say what she had meant to say about candy, and she felt in her secret soul the least bit irritated at Laura.

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Then Priscilla whirled in on her tiptoes, her hands behind her back. "The postman went right straight by, though I hung out the window and called and called. I guess he did n't hear me, he's awful deaf sometimes."

"Did n't I get a letter?" Elliott's face fell.

"Mail is slow getting through, these days," said Aunt Jessica, coming in from the main kitchen. "We always allow an extra day or two on the road. Was n't there anything at all from Bob or Sidney or Pete, Pris? You little witch, you certainly are hiding something behind your back."

Then Priscilla gave a gay little squeal and jumped up and down till her black curls bobbed all over her face. When she stopped jumping she looked straight at Elliott.

"Which hand will you take?" she asked.

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"I? Oh, have you a letter for me, after all?"

"You did n't guess it," said the child. "Which hand?"

"The right—no, the left."

Priscilla shook her head. "You are n't a very good guesser, are you? But I'll give it to you this time. It's not fat, but it looks nice. He did n't even get out, that postman did n't; he just tucked the letter in the box as he rode along."

"Certain sure he did n't tuck any other letter in too, Pris?" queried Laura.

The child held out empty hands.

"That's no proof. Your eyes are too bright." Laura turned her around gently. "Oh, I thought so! Stuck in your dress. From Bob!"

"Two," squealed Priscilla, with an emphatic little hop. "Here, give 'em to Mother. They're 'dressed to her. Now let's get into 'em, quick. Shall I ring the bell, Mother, to call in Father and the rest?"

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Two letters from Bob is a great big emergency; don't you think so?"

The words filtered negligently through Elliott's inattention. All her conscious thoughts were centered on her father's handwriting. She had had a cable before, but this was his first letter. It almost made her cry to see the familiar script and know that she could get nothing but letters from him for a whole long year. No hugs, no kisses, no rumpling of her hair or his, no confidential little talks—no anything that had been her meat and drink for years. How did people endure such separations? A big lump came up in her throat and the tears pricked her eyes; but she swallowed very hard and blinked once or twice and vowed, "I won't cry, I *won't!*"

And then suddenly, through her pre-occupation, she became aware of a hush fallen on the bubbling expectancy of the room. Glancing up from the page, she saw Henry standing in the doorway.

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Even to unfamiliar eyes there was something strangely arresting in the boy's look, a shocked gravity that cut like a premonition.

"They say Ted Gordon's been killed," he said.

"Ted—Gordon!" cried Laura.

"Practice flight, at camp. Nobody knows any particulars. Cy Jones told Father." The boy's voice sounded dry and hard.

"Are they certain there is no mistake?" his mother asked quietly.

"I guess it's true. Cy said the Gordons had a telegram."

"I must go over at once." Mrs. Cameron rose, putting the letters into Laura's hands, and took off her apron.

"I'll bring the car around for you," said Henry.

"Thank you." She smiled at him and turned to the girls. "You know what we are having for dinner, Laura. Priscilla

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will help make the shortcake, I'm sure. I will be back as soon as I can."

Mutely the four watched the little car roll out of the yard and down the hill.

Then Henry spoke. "Letters?"

"From Bob," said Laura.

"Did she read 'em?"

Laura shook her head.

"Gee!" said the boy.

"Perhaps she thought she could n't," hesitated Laura, "and go over there."

A moment of silence held the room. Henry broke it. "Well, we're not going. Let's hear 'em."

Elliott took a step toward the door.

"Need n't run away unless you want to," he called after her. "We always read Bob's letters aloud."

So Elliott stayed. Laura's pleasant voice, a bit strained at first, grew steadier as the reading proceeded. Henry sat whittling a stick into the coal-hod, his lips pursed as though for a whistle, but with-

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out sound, and still with that odd sober look on his face. Priscilla, all the jumpiness gone out of her, stood very still in the middle of the kitchen floor, a kind of hurt bewilderment in the big dark eyes fixed on Laura's face. Nobody laughed, nobody even chuckled, and yet it was a jolly letter that they read first, full of spirit and life and fun. High-hearted adventure rollicked through it, and the humor that makes light of hardship, and the latest slang of the front adorned its pages with grotesquely picturesque phrases. The Cameron boys were obviously getting a good time out of the war. Bob had got something else, too. The letter had been delayed in transmission and near the end was a sentence, "Brought down my first Hun to-day—great fight! I'll tell you about it next time if after due deliberation I decide the censor will let me."

"Some letter!" commented Henry. "Say, those aviators are living like princes,

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aren't they! Mess hall in a big grove with all the fixings. And eats! More than we get at home. Gee, I wish I was older!"

"So you could come in for the eats?" smiled his sister.

"So I could come in for things generally."

"You could n't work any harder if you were a man grown," she told him.

"Huh!" said Henry, "a lot I hurt myself!" But he liked the smile and the praise, wary though he might pretend to be of it. Sis was a good sort. "You're some worker, yourself. Let's get on to the next one."

The second letter—and it too bore a date disquietingly far from the present—told of the fight. It thrilled the four in the pleasant New England kitchen. The peaceful walls opened wide, and they were out in far spaces, patrolling the windy sky, mounting, diving, dodging through wisps

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of cloud, kings of the air, hunting for combat. Their eyes shone and their breathing quickened, and for a minute they forgot the boy who was dead.

"Why the Hun did n't bag me, instead of my getting him," wrote Bob, "is a mystery. Just the luck of beginners, I guess. I did most of the things I should n't have done, and, by chance, one or two of the things I should—fired when I was too far off, went into a spinning nose-dive under the mistaken notion it would make me a poor target, etc., etc., etc. Oh, I was green, all right! He knew how to manœuver, that Hun did. That's what feazes me. How did I manage to top him at last? Well, I did. And my gun did n't jam. Nuff said."

"Gee!" said Henry between his teeth. "And Ted Gordon had to go and miss all that! Gee!"

"If he had only got to the front!" sighed Laura.

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"Anything from Pete?" asked the boy.

"No."

"Sid?"

She shook her head. "We had a letter from Sid day before yesterday, you know."

"Sid lays 'em down pretty thick sometimes. Well, I must be getting on. This is n't weeding cabbages."

The three girls, left alone, reacted each in her own way to the touch of the dark wings that had so suddenly brushed the rim of their blithe young lives. Priscilla frankly did n't understand, but her sensitive spirit felt the chill of the event, and her big eyes gazed with a tinge of wonder at the blue sky and sunshine of the world outside.

"Seems sort of queer it 's so bright," she remarked.

Laura was busy, as were thousands of sisters at that very minute and every minute all over the land, scotching the fears that are always lying in wait, ready to lift

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their ugly heads. Queer the letters had come through so tardily! Where was Bob, her darling big brother, this minute? Where was Pete Fearing, hardly less dear than Bob? Pictures clicked through her brain, pictures built on newspaper prints that she had seen. But one died twice that way, she reflected, and it did no good. So she put the letters on the shelf beside the clock and brought out the potatoes for dinner.

“Ted Gordon was in the Yale Battery last summer,” she remarked. “He came up from camp to get his degree this year. Mrs. Gordon and Harriet went down. He was Scroll and Key.”

In Elliott's brain Laura's words made a swift connection. Before that, Ted Gordon had meant nothing to her, the name of a boy whom she had never seen, a country lad, whose death, while sudden and sad, could not touch her. Now, suddenly, he clicked into place in her own familiar

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world. A Scroll-and-Key man? Why, those were the men she knew—Bones, Scroll and Key, Hasty Pudding—he was one of them!

She felt a swift recoil. So that was what war came to. Not just natty figures in khaki that girls cried over in saying good-by to, or smiled at and told how perfectly splendid they were to go; not just high adventure and martial music and the rhythm of swinging brown shoulders; not just surgical dressings and socks and sweaters; not even just homes broken up for a time and fathers sailing overseas. Of course one understood with one's brain, that made part of the thrill of their going, but one did n't realize with the feeling part of one—how could a girl?—when they went away or when one made dressings. Yet did n't dressings more than anything else point to it? And Laura had said we did n't feel the war over here!

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A sense of something intolerable, not to be borne, overwhelmed Elliott. She pushed at it with both hands, as though by the physical gesture she could shove away the sudden darkness that had blotted with alien shadow the face of her familiar sun. Death! There was an unbearable unpleasantness about death. She had always felt ill at ease in its presence, in the very mention of its name; she had avoided every sign and symbol of it as she would a plague. And now, she foresaw for an instant of blinding clarity, perhaps it could not be avoided any longer. Was this young aviator's accident just a symbol of the way death was going to invade all the happy sheltered places? The thought turned the girl sick for a minute. How could Laura go on with her work so unfeelingly? And there was Priscilla getting out raspberries.

"I don't see," said Elliott, and her voice

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choked, "I don't see how you can *bear* to peel those potatoes!"

"Some one has to peel them," said Laura. "The family must have dinner, you know. We could n't work without eating. Besides, I think it helps to work."

Elliott brushed the last sentence aside. It fell outside her experience, and she did n't understand it. The only thing she did understand was the reiteration of work, work, and the pall of blackness that overshadowed her hitherto bright world. She wished again with all her heart that she had never come to Vermont. She did n't belong here; why could n't she have stayed where she did belong, where people understood her, and she them?

A great wave of homesickness swept over the girl, homesickness for the world as she had always known it, her world as it had been before the war warped and twisted and spoiled things. And yet, oddly enough, there was no sense in the

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Cameron house of anything being spoiled. They talked of Ted Gordon in the same unbated tone of voice in which they spoke of her cousin Bob or of his friend Pete Fearing, and they actually laughed when they told stories about him. Laura baked and brewed, and the results disappeared down the road in the direction Mother Jess had taken. Aunt Jessica herself returned, a trifle pale and tired-looking, but smiling as usual.

"Lucinda and Harriet are just as brave as you would expect them to be," Elliott heard her tell Father Bob. "No one knows yet how it happened. They hope to learn more from Ted's friends. Two of the aviators are coming up. Harriet told me they rather look for them to-morrow night."

Hastily Elliott betook herself out of hearing. She wanted to get beyond sight and sound of any reference to what had happened. It was the only way known to

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her to escape the disagreeable—to turn her back on it and run away. What she did n't see and think about, so far as she was concerned, was n't there. Hitherto the method had worked very well. What disquieted her now was a dull, persistent fear that it was n't going to work much longer.

So when Bruce remarked the next day, "I'm going to take part of the afternoon off and go for ferns; want to come?" she answered promptly, "Yes, indeed," though privately she thought him crazy. Ferns, on a perfectly good working-day? But when they were fairly started, she found she had n't escaped, after all. Instead, she had run right into the thing, so to speak.

"We want to make the church look pretty," Bruce said, as they tramped along. "And I happen to know where some beauties grow, maidenhair and the rarer sorts. It is n't everybody I'd dare to take along."

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"Is that so?" queried the girl. She wondered why.

"Things have a way of disappearing in the woods, unless they're treated right. Took a fellow with me once when I went for pink-and-white lady's-slippers, the big ones—they're beauties. He was crazy to go, and he promised to keep the place to himself. You could have picked bushels there then. Now they're all cleaned out."

"But why? Did people dig them up?"

"Picked 'em too close. Some things won't stand being cleaned up the way most people clean up flowers in the woods. They're free, and nobody's responsible."

In spite of her thoughts Elliott dimpled.

"I think it is quite safe to take me."

He grinned. "Maybe that's why I do it."

It was very pleasant, tramping along with Bruce in the bright day; pleasant, too, leaving the sunshine for the spicy coolness of the woods, and climbing up, up, among

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great tree-trunks and mossy rocks and trickling mountain brooks. Or it would have been pleasant, if one could only have forgotten the reason that underlay their journey. But when they had reached Bruce's secret spot and were cutting the wiry brown stems, and packing together carefully the spreading, many-fingered fronds so as not to break the delicate ferns, that undercurrent of numb consternation reasserted itself. Like Priscilla, Elliott felt a little shocked at the brightness of the sunshine, the blueness of the sky, and the beauty of the fern-filled glade.

"It was dreadful for him to be killed before he had done anything!" At last the words so long burning in her heart reached the tip of her tongue.

"Yes." Bruce's voice was sober. "It sure was hard."

"I should think his people would feel as though they could n't *stand* it!" Elliott declared. "If he had got to France—but



Cutting the wiry brown stems in the fern-filled glade

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now it is just a hideous, hideous waste!"

Bruce hesitated. "I suppose that is one way of looking at it."

"Why, what other way could there be?" She stared at him in surprise. "He was just learning to fly. He had n't done anything, had he?"

"No, he had n't done anything. But what he died for is just the same as though he had got across, is n't it, and had downed forty Huns?"

She continued to stare fixedly at the boy for a full minute. "Why, yes," she said at last, very slowly; "yes, I suppose it is." Curiously enough, the whole thing looked better from that angle.

For a long time she was silent, cutting and tying up ferns.

"How did you happen to think of that?"

"To think of what?" Bruce was tying his own ferns.

"What you said about—about *what* this Ted Gordon died for."

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It was Bruce's turn to look surprised. "I did n't think of anything. It's just a fact, is n't it?"

Then he began to load himself with ferns. Elliott would n't have supposed any one could carry as many as Bruce shouldered; he had great bunches in his hands, too.

"You look like a walking fernery," she said.

"Birnam Wood," he quoted and for a minute she could n't think what he meant. "Better let me take some of those on the ground," he said.

"No, indeed! I am going to do my share."

Quietly he possessed himself of two of her bunches. "That's your share. It will be heavy enough before we get home."

It was heavy, though not for worlds would Elliott have mentioned the fact. She helped Bruce put the ferns in water, and she went out at night and sprinkled

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them to keep them fresh; but she had an excuse ready when Laura asked if she would like to go over to the little white-spired church on the hill and help arrange them.

Nothing would have induced her to attend the services, either, though afterward she wished that she had. There seemed to have been something so high and fine and—yes—so cheerful about them, so martial and exalted, that she wished she had seen for herself what they were like. In Elliott's mind gloom had always been inseparably linked with a funeral, gloom and black clothes. Whereas Laura and her mother and Gertrude and Priscilla wore white. A good many things at the Cameron farm were very odd.

It was after every one had gone to bed and the lights were out that Elliott lay awake in her little slant-ceilinged room and worried and worried about Father, three thousand miles away. He was n't an avi-

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ator, it was true, but in France was n't the land almost as unsafe as the air? She had imagined so many things that might perfectly easily happen to him that she was on the point of having a little weep all by herself when Aunt Jessica came in. Did she know that Elliott was homesick? Aunt Jessica sat down on the bed, as she had sat that first night, and talked about comforting, commonplace things—about the new kittens, and how soon the corn might be ripe, and what she used to do when she was a girl in Washington. Elliott got hold of her hand and wound her own fingers in and out among Aunt Jessica's fingers, but in the end she spoke out the thing that was uppermost in her mind.

"Mother Jess," she said, using unconsciously the Cameron term; "Mother Jess, I don't like death."

She said it in a small, wabbly voice, because she felt very strongly and she was n't used to talking about such things. But

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she had to say it. Though if the room had n't been dark, I doubt if she could have got it out at all.

"No, dear," said Aunt Jessica, quietly. "Most of us don't like death. I wonder if your feeling is n't due to the fact that you think of it as an end?"

"What is it," asked Elliott, "but an end?" She was so astonished that her words sounded almost brusque.

"I like to think of it as a coming alive," said Aunt Jessica, "a coming alive more vigorously than ever. The world is beginning to think of it so, too."

Elliott lay still after Aunt Jessica had gone out of the room and tried to think about what she had said. It was quite the oddest thing that anybody had said yet. But all she really succeeded in thinking about was the quiet certainty in Aunt Jessica's voice, the comforting clasp of Aunt Jessica's arms, and the kiss still warm on her lips.

CHAPTER VII

PICNICKING

I FEEL like a picnic," said Mother Jess, "a genuine all-day-in-the-woods picnic."

It was rather queer for a grown-up to say such a thing right out like a girl, Elliott thought, but she liked it. And Aunt Jessica was sitting back on her heels, just like a girl too, looking up from the border where she was working. Elliott had caught sight of her blue chambray skirt under a haze of blue larkspurs and had come over to see what she was doing. It proved to be weeding with a clawlike thing that, wielded by Aunt Jessica's right hand, grubbed out weeds as fast as she could toss them into a basket with her left. Elliott was surprised. Weeding a flower-bed

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when, as she happened to know, the garden beets were n't finished did not square with her notions of what was what on the Cameron farm. She was so surprised that she answered absently, "That sounds fine. I think I feel so, too," and kept on wondering about Aunt Jessica.

"We usually have a picnic at this time of year when the haying is done," said that lady, and fell again to her weeding. "It is astonishing how fast a weed can grow. Look at that!" and she held up a spreading mat of green chickweed. "I have had to neglect the borders shamefully this summer."

Elliott squatted down beside her and twined her fingers in a tuft of grass. "May I help?" She gave a little tug to the grass.

"Delighted to have you. Look out! That's a Johnny-jump-up."

"Is it? Goodness! I thought it was a weed!"

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"Here is one in blossom. Spare Johnny. He is a faithful friend till the winter snows."

"Johnny-jump-up." Elliott's laughter gurgled over the name. "But he does rather jump up, does n't he? Funny little pansy thing! Funny name, too."

"Not so odd as a few others I know. Kiss-me-in-the-buttery, for instance."

"Not really!"

"Honest Injun, as Priscilla says."

"These borders are sweet." The girl let her gaze wander up and down the curving lines of color splashed across the gentle slope of the hill. "But flowers don't stand much chance in a war year, do they? I know people at home who have plowed theirs up and planted potatoes."

"A mistake," said Aunt Jessica, shaking the dirt vigorously from a fistful of sorrel. "A mistake, unless it is a question of life and death. We have too much land in this country to plow up our flowers, yet a while."

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And a war year is just the time when we need them most. No, I never feel I am wasting my time when I work among flowers."

"But they're not *necessary*, are they?" questioned Elliott. "Of course, they're beautiful; but I thought luxuries had to go, just now."

"Flowers a luxury? Oh, my dear little girl, put that notion out of your head quickly! American-beauty roses may be a luxury, and white lilacs in the dead of winter, but garden flowers, never! Wait till you see the daffodils dancing under those apple trees next spring!" And she nodded up the grassy slope at the apple trees as though she and they shared a delightful secret that Elliott did not yet know.

Privately the girl held a different opinion about next spring, but she wondered why Aunt Jessica should talk of daffodils. They seemed rather lugged into a conversation in July.

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Mother Jess reached with her clawlike weeder far into the border. Her voice came back over her shoulder in little gusts of words as she worked. "Did you ever hear that saying of the Prophet?—'He that hath two loaves let him sell one and buy a flower of the narcissus; for bread is food for the body, but narcissus is food for the soul.' That's the way I feel about flowers. They are the least expensive way of getting beauty and we can't live without beauty, now less than ever, since they have destroyed so much of it in France. There! now I must stop for to-day. Don't you want to take this culling-basket and pick it full of the prettiest things you can find for Mrs. Gordon? Perhaps you would like to take it over to her, too. It is n't a very long walk."

"But I've never met her."

"That won't matter. Just tell her who you are and that you belong to us. Mrs.

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Gordon loves flowers, though she has n't much time to tend them."

"I should n't think any one could have less time than you."

Aunt Jessica laughed. "Oh, I make time!"

Elliott picked up the flat green basket, lifted the shears she found lying in it, and went hesitatingly up and down the borders. "What shall I pick?"

"Anything. Suit yourself. Make the basket as pretty as you can. If you pick here and there, the borders won't show where you cut from them."

Mother Jess gathered up gloves and tools, and went away, tugging her basket of weeds. Elliott, left behind, surveyed the borders critically. To cut without letting it appear that she had cut was evidently what Aunt Jessica wanted. She reached in and snipped off a spire of larkspur from the very back of the border, then stood back to see what had happened.

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No, if one had n't known the stalk had been there, one would n't now know it was gone. The thing could be done, then. Cautiously she selected a head of white phlox. The result of that operation also was satisfactory.

Up and down the flowery path she went, snipping busily. On the stalks of larkspur and phlox she laid a mass of pink snapdragons and white candytuft, tucking in here and there sprays of just-opening baby's-breath to give a misty look to the basket. A bunch of English daisies came next; they blossomed so fast one did n't have to pick and choose among them; one could just cut and cut. And ought n't there to be pansies? "Pansies—that's for thoughts." Those wonderful purple ones with a sprinkling of the yellow—no, yellow would spoil the color scheme of the basket. These white beauties were just the thing. How lovely it all looked, blue and white and pink and purple!

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But there was n't much fragrance. Eye and nose searched hopefully. Heliotrope!—just a spray or two. There, now it was perfect. Anybody would be glad to see a basket like that coming. Only, she did wish some one else were to carry it, or else that she knew the people. It might not be so bad if she knew the people. Why should n't Laura or Trudy take it? Elliott walked very slowly up to the house, debating the question. A week ago she would n't have debated; she would have said, "Oh, I can't possibly." Or so she thought.

"How beautiful!" said Aunt Jessica's voice from the kitchen window. "You have made an exquisite thing, dear."

Elliott rested the basket on the window ledge and surveyed it proudly. "Is n't it lovely? And I don't think cutting this has hurt the borders a bit."

"I am sure not." Aunt Jessica's busy hands went back to her yellow mixing-

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bowl. "You know where the Gordons live, don't you?—in the big brick house at the cross-roads."

"Yes," said Elliott, and her feet carried her out of the yard, stopping only long enough to let her get her pink parasol from the hall, and down the hill toward the cross-roads. It was odd about Elliott's feet, when she had n't quite made up her mind whether or not she would go. Her feet seemed to have no doubt of it.

The pink parasol threw a becoming light on her face, as she knew it would, and the odor of heliotrope rose pleasantly in her nostrils as she walked along. But the basket grew heavy, astonishingly heavy. She would n't have believed a culling-basket with a few flowers in it could weigh so much. The farther Elliott walked, the heavier it grew. And she had n't gone a quarter of the way, either.

A horse's feet coming up rapidly behind

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her turned the girl's steps to the side of the road. The horse drew abreast and stopped, prancing. "Want a lift?" asked the man in the wagon. He was a big grizzled farmer, a friend of her uncle's.

Elliott nodded, smiling. "Oh, thank you!"

"Purty flowers you 've got there."

"Are n't they lovely! Aunt Jessica is sending them to Mrs. Gordon."

"That 's right! That 's right! Say, just look at them pansies, now! Flowers, they don't do nothin' but grow for that aunt of yours. She don't have to much more 'n look at 'em."

Elliott laughed. "She weeds them, I happen to know. I helped her this afternoon."

"Did you, now! But there 's a difference in folks. Take my wife: she plants 'em and plants 'em, but she can't keep none. They up and die on her, sure thing."

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Elliott selected a purple pansy. "This looks to me as though it would like to get into your buttonhole, Mr. Blair."

"Sho, now!" He flushed with pleasure, driving slowly as the girl fitted the pansy in place, a bit of heliotrope nestling beside it. "Smells good, don't it? Mother always had heliotrope in her garden. Takes me back to when I was a little shaver."

Elliott's deft fingers were busy with the English daisies.

"Now don't you go and spoil your basket."

"No, indeed! see what a lot there are left. Here is a little nosegay for your wife. And thank you so much for the lift."

He cranked the wheel and she jumped out, waving her hand as he drove on. Queer a man like that should love flowers!

It was only when she was walking up the graveled path to the door of the brick house that she remembered to compose her

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face into a proper gravity. She felt nervous and ill at ease. But she need n't go in, she reminded herself, just leave the flowers at the door. If only there were a maid, which there probably was n't! One could n't count for certain on getting right away from these places where the people themselves met one at the door.

"How do you do?" said a voice, advancing from the right. "What a lovely basket!"

Elliott jumped. She was ready to jump at anything and she had been looking straight ahead without a single glance aside from a non-committal brick front. Now she saw a hammock swung between two trees, a hammock still swaying from the impact of the girl who had just left it.

She was the biggest girl Elliott had ever seen, tall and fat and shapeless and very plain. She was all in white, which made her look bigger, and her skirt was at least three years old. There was a faint trickle

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of brown spots down the front of it, too, of which the girl seemed utterly unaware.

"You don't have to tell me where those flowers come from," she said. "You are Laura Cameron's cousin, aren't you? Glad to know you."

"Yes," said Elliott, "I am Elliott Cameron. Aunt Jessica sent these to your mother."

The girl's fingers felt cool and firm as they touched Elliott's, the only pleasant impression she had yet gathered.

"They look just like Mrs. Cameron. Sit down while I call Mother. Oh, she's not doing anything special. Mother!"

Elliott, conducted through the house to a wide veranda, sank into a chair, conscious in every nerve of her own slender waist line. What must it feel like to be so big? A minute later she seemed to herself to be engulfed between two mountains of flesh. A woman—more unwieldy, more shapeless, more oppressive even than

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the girl—waddled across the veranda floor. What she said Elliott really did n't know; afterward phrases of pleasure came back to her vaguely. She distinctly remembered the creaking of the rocking-chair when the woman sat down and her own frightened feeling lest some vital part should give way under the strain.

After a time, to her consciousness, mild blue eyes emerged from the mass of human bulk that fronted her; gray hair crinkled away from a broad white forehead. Then she perceived that Mrs. Gordon was not a very tall woman, not so tall as was her daughter. If anything, that made it worse, thought Elliott. Why, if she fell down, no one could tell which side up she ought to go—except, of course, head side on top. The idea gave her a hysterical desire to giggle. The fact that it would be so dreadful to laugh in this house made the desire almost uncontrollable.

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And then the big girl did laugh about something or other, laughed simply and naturally and really pleasantly. Elliott almost jumped again, she was so startled. To her, there was something repulsive in the sight of so much human flesh. At the same time it discouraged her. In the presence of these two she felt insignificant, even while she pitied them. She wished to get away, but instinctive breeding held her in her chair, chatting. She hoped what she said was n't too inane; she did n't know quite what she did say.

Just then suddenly Harriet Gordon asked a question: "Has your aunt said anything yet about a picnic this summer?"

"I heard her say this afternoon that she felt just like one," said Elliott.

Mother and daughter looked at each other triumphantly. "What did I tell you!" said one. "I thought it was about time," said the other.

"Jessica Cameron always feels like a

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picnic in midsummer," Mrs. Gordon explained. "After the haying's done. You tell her my little niece will want to go. Alma has been here three weeks and we haven't been able to do much for her. Do you think you will go, too, Harriet?"

"I'd rather not this time, Mother."

"The Bliss girls will probably go, and Alma knows them pretty well. She won't be lonesome."

"Oh, no," said Elliott, "we will see that she is n't lonely."

"Must you go? Tell Mrs. Cameron we will send our limousine whenever she says the word." On the way back through the house Harriet Gordon paused before the picture of a young man in aviator's uniform. "My brother," she said simply, and there was infinite pride in her voice.

Elliott stumbled down the path to the road. She quite forgot to put up the pink parasol. She carried it closed all the way home. Were they limousine people?

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You would never have guessed it to look at them. Why, she knew about picnics of that kind!—motor-car, luncheon-kit picnics! But what a shame to be so big! Could n't they *do* something about it? Good as gold, of course, and in such terrible sorrow! They were n't unfeeling. The girl's voice when she said, "My brother," proved that. It seemed as though knowing about them ought to make them attractive, but somehow it did n't. If they only understood how to dress, it would help matters. Queer, how nice boys could have such frumpy people! And Ted Gordon had been a perfectly nice boy. The picture proved that. But Aunt Jessica had been right about the flowers. The big woman and the farmer proved *that*. Altogether Elliott's mind was a queer jumble.

"She said she'd send back the basket to-morrow, Aunt Jessica," she reported. "Said she wanted to sit and look at it for a

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while just as it was. And Miss Gordon asked me to tell you that whenever you were ready for the picnic you must let her know and she would send around their limousine."

"If that is n't just like Harriet Gordon!" laughed Laura. "She is the wittiest girl! Did n't you like her, Elliott?"

Elliott's eyes opened wide. "What is there witty in saying she would send their limousine?"

Tom snorted. "Wait till you see it!"

"Why, she meant their hay-wagon! We always use the Gordon hay-wagon for this midsummer picnic. That's a custom, too."

Everybody laughed at the expression on Elliott's face.

"Not up on the vernacular, Lot?" giped Stannard.

"When is the picnic to be, Mother?" asked Laura.

"How about to-morrow?"

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"Better make it the day after," Father Bob suggested, and they all fell to discussing whom to ask.

So far as Elliott could see they asked everybody except townspeople. The telephone was kept busy that night and the next morning in the intervals of Mother Jess's and the girls' baking. Elliott helped pack up dozens of turnovers and cookies and sandwiches and bottled quarts of lemonade.

"The lemonade is for the children," said Laura. "The rest of us have coffee. Don't you love the taste of coffee that you make over a fire that you build yourself in the woods?"

"On picnics I have always had my coffee out of a thermos bottle," said Elliott.

"Oh, you poor *thing*! Why, you have n't had any good times at all, have you?"

Laura looked so shocked that for a min-

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ute Elliott actually wondered whether she ever really had had any good times. Privately she was n't at all sure that she was going to have a good time now, but she kept still about that doubt.

"Are n't you afraid it may rain to-morrow?" she asked.

"No, indeed! It never rains on things Mother plans."

And it did n't. The morning of the picnic dawned clear and dewy and sparkling, as perfect a summer day as though it had been made to the Camerons' order. By nine o'clock the big hay-wagon had appeared, driven by Mr. Gordon himself, who said he was going to turn over the reins to Mr. Cameron when they reached the Gordon farm. Two more horses were hitched on and all the Camerons piled in, with enough boxes and baskets and bags of potatoes, one would think, to feed a small town, and away the hay-wagon went down the hill, stopping at house after

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house to take in smiling people, with more boxes and baskets and bags.

It was all very care-free and gay, and Elliott smiled and chattered away with the rest; but in her heart of hearts she knew that there was n't one of these boys and girls who squeezed into the capacious hay-wagon to whom she would have given a second glance, before coming up here to Vermont. Now she wondered whether they were all as negligible as they looked. And pretty soon she forgot that she had ever thought they looked negligible. It was the jolliest crowd she had ever been in. One or two were a bit quiet when they arrived, but soon even the shyest were talking, or at least laughing, in the midst of the happy hubbub. It seemed as though one could n't have anything but a good time when the Camerons set out to be jolly. Alma Gordon and the little Bliss girls were the last to squeeze in and they rode away waving their hands vio-

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lently to a short, fat woman and a tall, fat girl, who waved briskly from the brick house's front door.

Then Mr. Cameron turned the horses into a mountain road and they began to climb. Up and up the wagon went with its merry load, through towering woods and open pastures and along hillsides where the woods had been cut and a tangle of underbrush was beginning to spring up among the stumps. And the higher the horses climbed the higher rose the jollity of the hay-wagon's company. The sun was hot overhead when they stopped. There were gray rocks and a tumbling mountain brook and a brown-carpeted pine wood. Everybody jumped out helter-skelter and began unloading the wagon or gathering fire-wood or dipping up water, or simply scampering around for joy of stretching cramped legs.

It was surprising how soon a fire was burning on the gray stones and coffee bub-

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bling in the big pail Mother Jess had brought; surprising, too, how good bacon tasted when you broiled it yourself on a forked stick and potatoes that you smooched your face on by eating them in their skins, black from the hot ashes that the boys poked them out of with green poles. Elliott knew now that she had never really picnicked before in her life and that she liked it. She liked it so much that she ate and ate and ate until she could n't eat another mouthful.

Perhaps she ate too much, but I doubt it. It is much more likely to have been the climb that she took in the hot sunshine directly after that dinner, and the climb would n't have hurt her, if she had ended the dinner without that last potato and the extra turnover and two cookies; or if she had rested a little before the climb. But perhaps, it was n't either the dinner or the climb; it may have been the pink ice-cream of the evening before; or that time

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in the celery patch, the previous morning, when she had forgotten her hat and would n't go back to the house for it because Henry had n't a hat on, and why should a girl need a hat more than a boy? Or it may have been all those things put together. She certainly had had a slight headache when she went to bed.

Whatever caused it, the fact was that on the ride home Elliott began to feel very sick. The longer she rode the sicker she felt and the more appalled and ashamed and frightened she grew. What could be going to happen to her? And what awful exhibition was she about to make of herself before all these people to whom she had felt so superior?

Before long people noticed how white she was and by the time the wagon reached the brick house at the cross-roads poor Elliott hardly cared if they did see it. Her pride was crushed by her misery. Mrs. Gordon and Harriet came out to welcome

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Alma home and they hesitated not a minute.

“Have them bring her right in here, Jessica. No, no, not a mite of trouble! We ’ll keep her all night. You go right along home, you and Laura. Mercy me, if we can’t do a little thing like this for you folks! She ’ll be all right in the morning.”

The words meant nothing to Elliott. She was quite beyond caring where she went, so that it was to a bed, flat and still and unmoving. But even in her distress she was conscious that, whatever came of it, she had had a good time.

CHAPTER VIII

A BEE STING

ELLIOTT was wretchedly, miserably ill. She despised herself for it and then she lost even the sensation of self-contempt in utter misery. She did n't care about anything—who helped her undress or where the undressing was done or what happened to her. Mercifully nobody talked; it would have killed her, she thought, to have to try to talk. They did n't even ask her how she felt. They only moved about quietly and did things. They put her to bed and gave her something to drink, after which for a time she did n't care if she did die; in fact, she rather hoped she would; and then the disgusting things happened and she felt worse

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and worse and then—oh wonder!—she began to feel better. Actually, it was sheer bliss just to lie quiet and feel how comfortable she was.

“I am so sorry!” she murmured apologetically to a presence beside the bed. “I have made you a horrid lot of trouble.”

“Not a bit,” said the presence, quietly. “So don’t you begin worrying about that.”

And she did n’t worry. It seemed impossible to worry about anything just then.

“I feel lots better,” she remarked, after a while.

“That’s right. I thought you would. Now I’m going to telephone your Aunt Jessica that you feel better, and you just lie quiet and go to sleep. Then you will feel better still. I’ll put the bell right here beside the bed. If you want anything, tap it.”

The presence waddled away—the girl could feel its going in the tremor of the bed

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beneath her—and Elliott out of half-shut eyes looked into the room. The shades were partially drawn and the light was dim. A little breeze fluttered the white scrim curtain. The girl's lazy gaze traveled slowly over what she could see without moving her head. To move her head would have been too much trouble. What she saw was spotless and clean and countrified, the kind of room she would have scorned this morning; now she thought it the most peaceful place in the world. But she did n't intend to go to sleep in it. She meant merely to lie wrapped in that delicious mantle of well-being and continue to feel how utterly content she was. It seemed a pity to go to sleep and lose consciousness of a thing like that.

But the first thing she knew she was waking up and the room was quite dark and she felt comfortable, but just the least bit queer. It could n't be that she was hungry!

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She lay and debated the point drowsily until a streak of light fell across the bed. The light came from a kerosene lamp in the hands of an immense woman whose mild blue eyes beamed on Elliott.

"There, you 've waked up, have n't you? I guess you 'll like a glass of milk now. You can bring it right up, Harriet. She 's awake."

The woman set down her lamp on a little table and lumbered about the room, adjusting the shades at the windows, while the lamp threw grotesque exaggerations on the wall. Elliott watched the shadows, a warm little smile at her heart. They were funny, but she found herself tender toward them. When the woman padded back to the bed the girl smiled, her cheek pillowed on her hand. She liked her there beside the bed, her big shapeless form totally obscuring the straight-backed chair. She did n't think of waist lines or clothes at all, only of how comfortable

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and cushiony and pleasant the large face looked. Motherly—might not that be the word for it? Somehow like Aunt Jessica, yet without the slightest resemblance except in expression, a kind of radiating lovingness that warmed one through and through, and made everything right, no matter how wrong it might have seemed.

“I telephoned your Aunt Jessica,” said the big woman. “She was just going to call us, and they all sent their love to you. Here’s Harriet with the milk. Do you feel a mite hungry?”

“I think that must be what was the matter with me. I was trying to decide when you came in.”

The fat form shook all over with silent laughter. It was fascinating to watch laughter that produced such a cataclysm but made no sound. Elliott forgot to drink in her absorption.

“Mother,” said Harriet Gordon, “Elliott thinks you’re a three-ringed circus.

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You must n't be so exciting till she has finished her milk."

Elliott protested, startled. "I think you are the kindest people in the world, both of you!"

"Mercy, child, anybody would have done the same! Don't you go to setting us up on pedestals for a little thing like that."

The fat girl was smiling. "Make it singular, mother. I have no quarrel with a pedestal for you, though it might be a little awkward to move about on."

Mrs. Gordon shook again with that fascinating laughter. "Mercy me! I'd tip off first thing and then where would we all be?"

Elliott's eyes sought Harriet Gordon's. If she had observed closely she would have seen spots on the white dress, but to-night she was not looking at clothes. She only thought what a kind face the big girl had and how extraordinarily pleasant her voice was and what good friends she

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and her mother were, just like Laura and Aunt Jessica, only different.

"There!" said Mrs. Gordon. "You drank up every drop, didn't you? You must have been hungry. Now you go right to sleep again and I'll miss my guess if you don't feel real good in the morning."

"Good night," said Harriet from the door. "Did you give Blink her good-night mouthful, Mother?"

"No, I didn't. How I do forget that cat!" said Mrs. Gordon. She turned down the sheet under Elliott's chin, patted it a little, and asked, "Don't you want your pillow turned over?" Then quite naturally she stooped down and kissed the girl. "I guess you're all right now. Good night." And Elliott put both arms around her neck and hugged her, big as she was. "Good night," she said softly.

The next time Elliott woke up it was broad daylight. Her eyes opened on a

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framed motto, "God is Love," and she had to lie still and think a full minute before she could remember where she was and why she was there at all. Then she smiled at the motto—it was n't the kind of thing she liked on walls, but to see it there did not make her feel in the least superior this morning—and jumped out of bed. As Mrs. Gordon had prophesied, she felt well, only the least bit wobbly. Probably that was because it was before breakfast—her breakfast. She had a disconcerting fear that it might be long long after other people's breakfasts and for the first time in her life she was distressed at making trouble. Hitherto it had seemed right and normal for people to put themselves out for her.

She dressed as quickly as she could and went down-stairs. Harriet was shelling peas on the big veranda that looked off across the valley to the mountains. There

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must have been rain in the night, for the world was bathed clean and shining.

"Mother said to let you sleep as long as you would." Harriet stopped the current of apology on Elliott's lips. "Did you have a good night?"

"Splendid! I did n't know a thing from the time your mother went out of the room until half an hour ago."

"Did n't know anything about the thunder-shower?"

"Was there a thunder-shower?"

"A big one. It put our telephone out of commission."

"I did n't hear it," said Elliott.

"It almost pays to be sick, to find out how good it feels to be well, does n't it? Here's a glass of milk. Drink that while I get your breakfast."

"Can't I do it? I hate to make you more trouble."

"Trouble? Forget that word! We

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like to have you here. It is good for Mother. Gives her something to think about. Can't you spend the day?"

Now, Elliott wanted to get home at once; she had been longing ever since she woke up to see Mother Jess and Laura and Father Bob and Henry and Bruce and everybody else on the Cameron farm, not omitting Prince and the chickens and the "black and whitey" calf; but she thought rapidly: if it really made things any easier for the Gordons to have her here—

"Why, yes, I can stay if you want me to." It cost her something to say those words, but she said them with a smile.

"Good! I'll telephone Mrs. Cameron that we will bring you home this afternoon. I'll go over to the Blissess' to do it, though maybe their telephone's knocked out, too. The one at our hired man's house is n't working. Here comes Mother with an egg the hen has just laid for your breakfast."

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“Just a-purpose,” said Mrs. Gordon. “It ’s warm yet and marked ‘Elliott Cameron’ plain as daylight. Is my hair full of straw, Harriet?”

“It is, straw and cobwebs. Where have you been, Mother? You know you have n’t any business in the haymow or crawling under the old carryall. Why don’t you let Alma bring in the eggs? She ’s little and spry.”

“Pooh!” said Mrs. Gordon, with one of her silent laughs. “Pooh, pooh! Alma is n’t any match for old Whitefoot yet. You ’d think that hen laid awake nights thinking up outlandish places to lay her eggs in. Wait till you get to be sixty, Harriet. Then you ’ll know you can’t let folks wait on you. Before that it ’s all right, but after sixty you ’ve got to do for yourself, if you don’t want to grow old.—Two, dearie? I ’m going to make you a drop-egg on toast for your breakfast.”

“Oh, no, one!” cried Elliott. “I never

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eat two. And can't I help? I hate to have you get my breakfast."

"Why, yes, you can dish up your oatmeal," calmly cracking a second egg. "'T won't do a mite of harm to have two. Maybe you're hungrier than you think. Now Harriet, the water, and we're all ready. I'll help you finish those peas while she eats."

The woman and the girl shelled peas, their fat fingers fairly flying through the pods, while Elliott devoured both eggs and a bowl of oatmeal and a pitcher of cream and a dish of blueberries and wondered how they could make their fingers move so fast.

"Practice," said Mrs. Gordon in answer to the girl's query. "You do a thing over and over enough times and you get so you can't help doing it fast, if you've got any gumption at all. The quarts of peas I've shelled in my life time would feed an army, I guess."

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"Don't you ever get tired?"

"Tired of shelling peas? Land no, I like it! I can sit in here and look at you, or out on the back piazza and watch the mountains, or on the front step and see folks drive by, and I've always got my thoughts." A shadow crossed the placid face. "My thoughts work better when my fingers are busy. I'd hate to just sit and hold my hands. Ted dared me once to try it for an hour. That was the longest hour I ever spent."

Mrs. Gordon had risen to peer through the window after a rapidly receding wagon.

"There!" she said. "There goes that woman from Bayfield I want to sell some of my bees to. She's going down to Blisses' and I'd better walk right over and talk to her, as the telephone won't work. I'most think one hive is going to swarm this morning, but I guess I'll have time to get back before they come out."

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Hello, Johnny, how do you do to-day?"

"All right," lisped the small solemn-eyed urchin who had strayed in from the kitchen and now stood in the door hitching at a diminutive pair of trousers and eying Elliott absorbedly. "Gone!" he announced suddenly; coming out of his scrutiny.

"What, your button?" Harriet pulled him up to her. "I'll sew it on in a jiffy. Don't worry about the bees, Mother. I can manage them, if they decide to swarm before you get back, and while you're at the Blissess' just telephone central our phone's out of order—and oh, please tell Mrs. Cameron we're keeping Elliott till afternoon."

Mrs. Gordon departed and Harriet sewed on the button. "There, Johnny, now you're all right. You can run out and play."

But Johnny became suddenly galvanized into action. He dived into a small pocket

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and produced a note, crumpled and soiled, but still legible.

"If that is n't provoking!" said Harriet, when she had read it. "Why did n't you give me this the first thing, Johnny? Then Mother could have done this telephoning, too, at the Blisses'."

"What is it?" asked Elliott.

"A message Johnny's mother wants sent. She's our hired man's wife and I must say at times she shows about as much brains as a chicken. You'd think she'd know our 'phone would n't be likely to work, if hers did n't. Now I shall have to go over to the Blisses' myself, I suppose. The message seems fairly important. Where has your mother gone, Johnny?"

But Johnny did n't know; beyond a vague "she wided away" he was noncommittal.

"She might have stopped somewhere and telephoned for herself, I should think," grumbled Harriet. "I'll be back

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in a few minutes. Or will you come, too? If I can't 'phone from the Blisses' I may have to go farther."

"I'll stay here, I think, and wash up my dishes. And after that I'll finish the peas."

"Mercy me, I shan't be gone that long! We're shelling these to put up, you know. Don't bother about washing your dishes, either. They'll keep."

"Who's saying bother, now?" Elliott's dimples twinkled mischievously.

Harriet laughed. "You and Johnny can mind the place. The men and Alma are all off at the lower farm and here goes the last woman. Good-by."

Elliott went briskly about her program. She found soap and a pan and rinsed her dishes under the hot-water faucet. Then she sat down to the peas. Johnny, who had followed her about for a while, deserted her for pressing affairs of his own out-of-doors. Elliott pinched the pods as

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scientifically as she knew how and wondered whether, if she should shell peas all her life, her slender fingers would ever acquire the lightning nimbleness of the Gordons' fat ones. How long Harriet was gone!

She was thinking about this when she heard something that made her first stop her work to listen and then jump up hurriedly, spilling the peas out of her lap. The wailing of a terrified child was coming nearer and nearer. Elliott set down the peas that were left and ran out on the veranda. There was Johnny stumbling up the path, crying at the top of his lungs.

"Why, Johnny!" She ran toward him. "Why, Johnny, what is the matter?"

Johnny precipitated himself into her arms in a torrent of tears. Not a word was distinguishable, but his wails pierced the girl's ear-drums.

"Johnny! Johnny, *stop it!* Tell me where you're hurt."

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But Johnny only sobbed the harder. He could n't be in danger of death—could he?—when he screamed so. That showed his lungs were all right, and his legs worked, too, and his arms. They were digging into her now, with a force that almost upset her equilibrium. Could something be wrong inside of him?

“What's the matter, Johnny? Stop crying and tell me.”

Johnny's yells slackened for want of breath. He held up one brown little hand. She inspected it. Dirty, of course, unspeakably, but otherwise—Oh, there was a bunch on one knuckle, a bunch that was swelling. “Is that where it hurts you, Johnny?”

Johnny nodded, gulping.

“Did something sting you?”

“Bee stung Johnny. *Naughty* bee!”

The girl stared at the small grimy hand in consternation. A bee sting! What did you do for a bee sting or any kind of

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a sting for that matter? Mosquitoes—hamamelis. And where did the Gordons keep their hamamelis bottle?

Johnny's screams, abated in expectation of relief, began to rise once more. He was angry. Why didn't she *do* something? This delay was unendurable. His voice mounted in a long, piercing wail.

"Don't cry," the girl said nervously. "Don't cry. Let's go into the house and find something."

Up-stairs and down she trailed the shrieking child. At the Cameron farm there were two hamamelis bottles, one in the bath-room, the other on a shelf in the kitchen. But nothing rewarded her search here. If only some one were at home! If only the telephone were n't out of order! Desperately she took down the receiver, to be greeted by a faint, continuous buzzing. There was nothing for it; she must leave Johnny and run to a neighbor's. But Johnny refused to be left. He

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clung to her and kicked and screamed for pain and the terror of finding his secure baby world falling to pieces about his ears.

"It's a shame, Johnny. I ought to know what to do, but I don't. You come too, then."

But Johnny refused to budge. He threw himself on his back on the veranda and beat the floor with his heels and wailed long heart-piercing wails that trembled into sobbing silence, only to begin all over with fresh vigor. Elliott was at her wits' end. She did n't dare go away and leave him; she was afraid he might kill himself crying. But might n't he do so if she stayed? He pushed her away when she tried to comfort him. There was only one thing that he wanted; he would have none of her, if she did n't give it to him.

Never in her life had Elliott Cameron felt so insignificant, so helpless and futile, as she did at that minute. "Oh, you

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poor baby!" she cried, and hated herself for her ignorance. Laura would have known what to do; Harriet Gordon would have known. Would nobody ever come?

"What's the matter with him?" The question barked out, brusque and sharp, but never had a voice sounded more welcome in Elliott Cameron's ears. She turned around in joyful relief to encounter a pair of gimlet-like black eyes in the face of an old woman. She was an ugly little old woman in a battered straw hat and a shabby old jacket, though the day was warm, and a faded print skirt that was draggled with mud at the hem. Her hair strayed untidily about her face and unfathomable scorn looked out of her snapping black eyes.

"It's a—a bee sting," stammered the girl, shrinking under the scorn.

"Hee-hee-hee!" The old woman's laughter was cracked and high. "What kind of a lummux are you? Don't know

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what to do for a bee sting! Hee-hee! Mud, you gawk you, mud!"

She bent down and slapped up a handful of wet soil from the edge of the fern bed below the veranda. "Put that on him," she said and went away giggling a girl's shrill giggle and muttering between her giggles: "Don't know what to do for a bee sting. Hee-hee!"

For a whole minute after the queer old woman had gone Elliott stood there, staring down at the spatter of mud on the steps, dismay and wrath in her heart. Then, because she did n't know anything else to do and because Johnny's screams had redoubled, she stooped, and with gingerly care picked up the lump of black mud and went over to the boy. Mud could n't hurt him, she thought, put on outside; it certainly could n't hurt him, but could it help?

She sat down on the floor and lifted the little swollen fist and held the cool mud

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on it, neither noticing nor caring that some trickled down on her own skirt. She sat there a long time, or so it seemed, while Johnny's yells sank to long-drawn sobs and then ceased altogether as he snuggled forgivingly against her arm. And in her heart was a great shame and an aching feeling of inadequacy and failure. Elliott Cameron had never known so bitter a five minutes. All her pride and self-sufficiency were gone. What was she good for in a practical emergency? Just nothing at all. She didn't know even the commonest things, not the commonest.

"It must have been Witless Sue," said Aunt Jessica, late that afternoon, when Elliott told her the story. "She is a half-witted old soul who wanders about digging herbs in summer and lives on the town farm in winter. There's no harm in her."

"Half-witted!" said Elliott. "She knew more than I did."

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"You have not had the opportunity to learn."

"That did n't make it any better for Johnny. Laura knows all those things, does n't she? And Trudy, too?"

"I think they know what to do in the simpler emergencies of life."

"I wish I did. I took a first-aid course, but it did n't have stings in it, not as far as we'd gone when I came away. We were taught bandaging and using splints and things like that."

"Very useful knowledge."

"But Johnny got stung," said Elliott, as though nothing mattered beyond that fact. "Do you think you could teach me things, now and then, Aunt Jessica? the things Laura and Trudy know?"

"Surely," said Aunt Jessica, "and very gladly. There are things that you could teach Laura and Trudy, too. Don't forget that entirely."

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"Could I? Useful things?" She asked the question with humility.

"Very useful things in certain kinds of emergency. What did Mrs. Gordon do for Johnny when she got home?"

"Oh, she washed his hand and soaked it in strong soda and water, baking-soda, and then she bound some soda right on, for good measure, she said."

"There!" said Aunt Jessica. "Now you know two things to do for a bee sting."

Elliott opened her eyes wide. "Why, so I do, don't I? I truly do."

"That's the way people learn," said Mother Jess, "by emergencies. It is the only way they are sure to remember. Laura is helping Henry milk. Suppose you make us some biscuit for supper, Elliott."

Elliott started to say, "I've never made biscuit," but shut her lips tight before the words slipped out.

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"I will tell you the rule. You'd better double it for our family. Everything is plainly marked in the pantry. Perhaps the fire needs another stick before you begin."

Carefully the girl selected a stick from the wood-box. "Just let me get my apron, Aunt Jessica," she said.

CHAPTER IX

ELLIOTT ACTS ON AN IDEA

SIX weeks later a girl was busy in the sunny white kitchen of the Cameron farm. The girl wore a big blue apron that covered her gown completely from neck to hem, and she hummed a little song as she moved from sink to range and range to table. There was about her a delicate air of importance, almost of elation. You know as well as I where Elliott Cameron ought to have been by this time. Six weeks plus how many other weeks was it since she left home? The quarantine must have been lifted from her Uncle James's house for at least a month. But the girl in the kitchen looked surprisingly like Elliott Cameron. If it was n't

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she, it must have been her twin, and I have never heard that Elliott had a twin.

Though she was all alone in the kitchen—washing potatoes, too—she did n't appear in the least unhappy. She went over to the stove, lifted a lid, glanced in, and added two or three sticks of wood to the fire. Then she brought out a pan of apples and went down cellar after a roll of pie crust. Some one else may have made that pie crust. Elliott took it into the pantry, turned the board on the flour barrel, shook flour evenly over it from the sifter, and, cutting off one end of the pie crust, began to roll it out thin on the board. She arranged the lower crust on three pie-plates, and, going into the kitchen again, began to peel the apples and cut them up into the pies. Perhaps she was n't so quick about it as Laura might have been, but she did very well. The skin fell from her knife in long, thin, curly strips. After that she



"I'm getting dinner all by myself"

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finished the pies off in the pantry and tucked all three into the oven. Squatting on her feet in front of the door, she studied the dial intently for a moment and hesitatingly pushed the draft just a crack open. If it hadn't been for that momentary indecision, you might have thought that she had been baking pies all her life. Then she began to peel the potatoes.

So it was that Stannard found her. "Hello!" he said, with a grin. "Busy?"

"Indeed, I am! I'm getting dinner all by myself."

He went through a pantomime of dodging a blow. "Whew-ee! Guess I'll take to the woods."

"Better not. If you do, you will miss a good dinner. Mother Jess said I might try it. Boiled potatoes and baked fish—she showed me how to fix that—and corn and things. There's one other dish on my menu that I'm not going to tell

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you.” And all her dimples came into play.

“H’m!” said Stannard, “we feel pretty smart, don’t we? Well, maybe I’ll stay and see how it pans out. A fellow can always tighten his belt, you know.”

“Are n’t you horrid!” She made up a face at him, a captivating little grimace that wrinkled her nose and set imps of mischief dancing in her eyes.

Stannard watched her as with firm motions she stripped the husks from the corn, picking off the clinging strands of silk daintily.

“Gee, Elliott!” he exclaimed. “Do you know, you’re prettier than ever!”

She dropped him a courtesy. “I must be, with a smooch of flour on my nose and my hair every which way.”

He grinned. “That’s a story. Your hair looks as though Madame What’s-her-name, that you and Mater and the girls go to so much, had just got through

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with you. I've never seen you when you didn't look as though you had come out of a bandbox."

"Have n't you? Think again, Stan, think again! What about your Cousin Elliott in a corn-field?"

Stannard slapped his thigh. "That's so, too! I forgot that. But your hair's all to the good, even then."

"Stan," warned Elliott, "you'd better be careful. You will get in too deep to wade out, if you don't watch your step. What are you getting at, anyway? Why all these compliments?"

"Compliments! A fellow does n't have to praise up his cousin, does he? It just struck me, all of a sudden, that you look pretty fit."

"Thanks. I'm feeling as fit as I look. Out with it, Stan; what do you want?"

"Why, nothing," said Stannard, "nothing at all. Shall I take out those husks, Lot?"

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"Delighted. The pigs eat 'em." Her eyes held a quizzical light. "If you're trying to rattle me so I shall forget something and spoil my dinner, you can't do it."

"What do you take me for?" He departed with the husks, deeply indignant.

In five minutes he was back. "When are you going home?"

"I don't know. Not just yet. Your mother has too many house parties."

"That won't make any difference."

"Oh, yes, it does! Her house is full all the time."

"Shucks! Have you asked her if there's a room ready for you?"

"Indeed I have n't! I would n't think of imposing on a busy hostess."

"I might say something about it," he suggested slyly.

"You will do nothing of the kind."

"Oh, I don't know! I'm going home myself day after to-morrow."

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Hastily Elliott set down the kettle she had lifted. "Are you? That's nice. I mean, we shall miss you, but of course you have to go some time, I suppose."

"It won't be any trouble at all to speak to Mother."

"Stannard," and the color burned in her cheeks, "will you *please* stop fiddling around this kitchen? It makes me nervous to see you. I nearly burned myself in the steam of that kettle and I'm liable to drop something on you any time."

"Oh, all right! I'll get out. Fiddling is a new verb with you, is n't it?"

"Yes, I picked it up. Very expressive, I think."

"Sounds like the natives."

"Sounds pretty well, then. Did I hear you say you had an errand somewhere?"

"No, you did n't. You merely heard me say that finding myself *de trop* in my fair cousin's company, I'd get out of

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range of her big guns. Never expected to rattle you, Lot."

"I'm not rattled."

"No? Pretty good imitation, then. Oh, I'm going! Mother's ready for you all right, though; says so in this letter. Here, I'll stick it in your apron pocket. Better come along with me, day after tomorrow. What say?"

"I'll see," said Elliott, briefly.

He grinned teasingly, "Ta-ta," and went off, leaving turmoil behind him.

The minute Stannard was out of the door Elliott did a strange thing. Reaching with wet pink thumb and forefinger into the depths of the blue apron pocket, she extracted the letter and hurled it across the kitchen into a corner.

"There!" she cried disdainfully, "you go over there and *stay* a while, horrid old letter! I'm not going to let you spoil my perfectly good time getting dinner."

But it was spoiled: no mere words

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could alter the fact. Try as she would to put the letter out of her mind and think only of how to do a dozen things at once one quarter as quickly and skilfully as Laura and Aunt Jessica did them, which is what the apparently simple process of dishing up a dinner means, the fine thrill of the enterprise was gone. Laura came in to help her and Elliott's tongue tripped briskly through a deal of chatter, but all the while underneath there was a little undercurrent of uneasiness and anxiety. Would n't you have thought it would delight her to have the opportunity of doing what she had so much wished to do?

"What's this?" Laura asked, spying the white envelop on the floor; "a letter?"

"Oh, yes," said Elliott, "one I dropped," and she tucked it into the pocket of the white skirt that had been all the time under the blue apron, giving it a vindictive little slap as she did so. Which, of

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course, was quite uncalled for, as if any one was responsible for what was in the letter, that person was Elliott Cameron. The fact that she knew this very well only added a little extra vigor to the slap.

And all through dinner she sat and laughed and chattered away, exactly as though she weren't conscious in every nerve of the letter in her pocket, despite the fact that she didn't know a word it said. But she didn't eat much: the taste of food seemed to choke her. Her gaze wandered from Mother Jess to Father Bob and back, around the circle of eager, happy, alert faces. And she felt—poor Elliott!—as though her first discontent were a boomerang now returned to stab her.

"This is Elliott's dinner, I would have you all know," announced Laura when the pie was served. "She did it all herself."

"Not every bit," said Elliott, honestly;

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but her disclaimer was lost in the chorus of praise.

Father Bob laid down his fork, looking pleased. "Did you, indeed? Now, this is what I call a well-cooked dinner."

"I'll give you a recommend for a cook," drawled Stannard, "and eat my words about tightening my belt, too."

"Some dinner!" Bruce commented.

"Please, I'd like another piece," said Priscilla.

"Me, too," chimed in Tom. "It's corking."

Laura clapped her hands. "Listen, Elliott, listen! Could praise go further?"

But Mother Jess, when they rose from the table, slipped an arm through Elliott's and drew her toward the veranda. "Did the cook lose her appetite getting dinner, little girl?"

"Oh, no, indeed, Aunt Jessica! Getting dinner did n't tire me a bit. I just

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loved it. I—I did n't seem to feel hungry this noon, that was all."

Mother Jess patted her arm. "Well, run away now, dear. You are not to give a thought to the dishes. We will see to them."

At that minute Elliott almost told her about the letter in her pocket, that lay like a lump of lead on her heart. But Henry appeared just then in the doorway and the moment passed.

"Run away, dear," repeated Aunt Jessica, and gave the girl a little push and another little pat. "Run away and get rested."

Slowly Elliott went down the steps and along the path that led to the flower borders and the apple trees. She was n't really conscious of the way she was going; her feet took charge of her and carried her body along while her mind was busy. When she came out among a few big trees

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with a welter of piled-up crests on every side, she was really astonished.

“Why!” she cried; “why, here I am on the top of the hill!”

A low, flat rock invited her and she sat down. It was queer how different everything seemed up here. What looked large from below had dwindled amazingly. It took, she decided, a pretty big thing to look big on a hilltop.

She drew Aunt Margaret’s letter out of her pocket and read it. It was very nice, but somehow had no tug to it. Phrases from a similar letter of Aunt Jessica’s returned to the girl’s mind. How stupid she had been not to appreciate that letter!—stupid and incredibly silly.

But had n’t she felt something else in her pocket just now? Conscience pricked when she saw Elizabeth Royce’s handwriting. The seal had not been broken, though the letter had come yesterday.

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She remembered now. They were putting up corn and she had tucked it into her pocket for later reading and then had forgotten it completely. Luckily, Bess need never know that. But what would Bess have said to see her friend Elliott, corn to the right of her, corn to the left of her, cobs piled high in the summer kitchen?

Bess's staccato sentences furnished a sufficiently emphatic clue. "You poor, abused dear! Whenever are you coming home? If I had an aëroplane I'd fly up and carry you off. You must be nearly *crazy*! Those letters you wrote were the most TRAGIC things! I should n't have been a bit surprised any time to hear you were sick. *Are* you sick? Perhaps that's why you don't write or come home. Wire me *the minute you get this*. Oh, Elliott darling, when I think of you marooned in that awful place—"

There was more of it. As Elliott read,

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she did a strange thing. She began to laugh. But even while she laughed she blushed, too. *Had* she sounded as desperate as all that? How far away such tragedies seemed now! Suppose she should write, "Dear Bess, I like it up here and I am going to stay my year out." Bess would think her crazy; so would all the girls, and Aunt Margaret, too.

And then suddenly an arresting idea came into her head. What difference would it make if they did think her crazy? Elliott Cameron had never had such an idea before; all her life she had in a perfectly nice way thought a great deal about what people thought of her. This idea was so strange it set her gasping. "But how they would *talk* about me!" she said. And then her brain clicked back, exactly like another person speaking, "What if they did? That would n't really make you crazy, would it?" "Why, no, I suppose it would n't," she thought. "And

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most likely they 'd be all talked out by the time I got back, too. But even if they were n't, any one would be crazy to think it was crazy to want to stay up here at Uncle Bob's and Aunt Jessica's. Even Stannard has stayed weeks longer than he needed to!"

When she thought of that she opened her eyes wide for a minute. "Oho!" she said to herself; "I guess Stan did get a rise out of me! You were easy game that time, Elliott Cameron."

She sat on her mossy stone a long time. There was n't anything in the world, was there, to stand in the way of her staying her year out, the year she had been invited for, except her own silly pride? What a little goose she had been! She sat and smiled at the mountains and felt very happy and fresh and clean-minded, as though her brain had finished a kind of house-cleaning and were now put to rights again, airy and sweet and ready for use.

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The postman's wagon flashed by on the road below. She could see the faded gray of the man's coat. He had been to the house and was townward bound now. How late he was! Nothing to hurry down for. There would be a letter, perhaps, but not one from Father. His had come yesterday. She rose after a while and drifted down through the still September warmth, as quiet and lazy and contented as a leaf.

Priscilla's small excited face met her at the door.

"Sidney's sick; we just got the letter. Mother's going to camp to-morrow."

"Sidney sick! Who wrote? What's the matter?"

"He did. He's not much sick, but he doesn't feel just right. He's in the hospital. I guess he can't be much sick, if he wrote, himself. Mother was n't to come, he said, but she's going."

"Of course." Nervous fear clutched

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Elliott's throat, like an icy hand. Oh, poor Aunt Jessica! Poor Laura!

"Where are they?" she asked.

"In Mumsie's room," said Priscilla. "We're all helping."

Elliott mounted the stairs. She had to force her feet along, for they wished, more than anything else, to run away. What should she say? She tried to think of words. As it turned out, she did n't have to say anything.

Laura was the only person in Aunt Jessica's room when they reached it. She sat in a low chair by a window, mending a gray blouse.

"Elliott's come to help, too," announced Priscilla.

"That's good," said Laura. "You can put a fresh collar and cuffs in this gray waist of Mother's, Elliott—I'll have it done in a minute—while I go set the crab-apple jelly to drip. And perhaps you can mend this little tear in her skirt."

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Then I'll press the suit. There is n't anything very tremendous to do."

It was all so matter-of-fact and quiet and natural that Elliott did n't know what to make of it. She managed to gasp, "I hope Sidney is n't very sick."

"He thinks not," said Laura, "but of course Mother wants to see for herself. She is telephoning Mrs. Blair now about the Ladies' Aid. They were to have met here this week. Mother thinks perhaps she can arrange an exchange of dates, though I tell her if Sid's as he says he is, they might just as well come."

Elliott, who had been all ready to put her arms around Laura's neck and kiss and comfort her, felt the least little bit taken aback. It seemed that no comfort was needed. But it was a relief, too. Laura *could n't* sit there, so cool and calm and natural-looking, sewing and talking about crab-apple juice and Ladies' Aid, if there were anything radically wrong.

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Then Aunt Jessica came into the room and said that Mrs. Blair would like the Ladies' Aid, herself, that week; she had been wishing she could have them; and didn't Elliott feel the need of something to eat to supplement her scanty dinner?

That put to rout the girl's last fears. She smiled quite naturally and said without any stricture in her throat: "Honestly, I'm not hungry. And I am going to put a clean collar in your blouse."

"What should I do without my girls!" smiled Mother Jess.

It was after supper that the telegram came, but even then there was no panic. These Camerons didn't do any of the things Elliott had once or twice seen people do in her Aunt Margaret's household. No one ran around futilely, doing nothing; no one had hysterics; no one even cried.

Mother Jess's face went very white when Father Bob came back from the tele-

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phone and said, "Sidney is n't so well."

"Have they sent for us?"

He nodded. "You'd better take the sleeper. The eighty-thirty from Upton will make it."

"Can you—?"

"Not with things the way they are here."

Then they all scattered, to do the things that had to be done. Elliott was helping Laura pack the suit-case when she had her idea. It really was a wonderful idea for a girl who had never in her life put herself out for any one else. Like a flash the first part of it came to her, without thought of a sequel; and the words were out of her mouth almost before she was aware she had thought them.

"You ought to go, Laura!" she cried. "Sidney is your twin."

"I'd like to go." Something in the guarded tone, something deep and intense and controlled, struck Elliott to conster-

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nation. If Laura felt that way about it!

"Why don't you, Laura? Can't you possibly?"

The other shook her head. "Mother is the one to go. If we both went, who would keep house here?"

For a fraction of a second Elliott hesitated. "*I would.*"

The words once spoken, fairly swept her out of herself. All her little prudences and selfishnesses and self-distrusts went overboard together. Her cheeks flamed. She dropped the brush and comb she was packing and dashed out of the room.

A group of people stood in the kitchen. Without stopping to think, Elliott ran up to them.

"Can't Laura go?" she cried eagerly. "It will be so much more comfortable to be two than one. And she is Sidney's twin. I don't know a great deal, but people will help me, and I got dinner this

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noon. Oh, she must go! Don't you see that she must go?"

Father Bob looked at the girl for a minute in silence. Then he spoke: "Well, I guess you're right. I will look after the chickens."

"I'll mix their feed," said Gertrude; "I know just how Laura does it—and I'll do the dishes."

"I'll get breakfasts," said Bruce.

"I'll make the butter," said Tom. "I've watched Mother times enough. And helped her, too."

"I'll see to Prince and the kitty," chimed in Priscilla, "and do, oh, lots of things!"

"I'll be responsible for the milk," said Henry.

"I'll keep house," said Elliott, "if you leave me anything to do."

"And I'll help you," said Harriet Gordon.

It was really settled in that minute,

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though Father Bob and Mother Jess talked it over again by themselves.

"Are you sure, dear, you want to do this?" Mother Jess asked Elliott.

"Perfectly sure," the girl answered. She felt excited and confident, as though she could do anything.

"It won't be easy."

"I know that. But please let me try."

"And there are the Gordons," said Mother Jess, half to herself.

"Yes," echoed Elliott, "there are the Gordons."

When the little car ran up to the door to take the two over to Upton and Mother Jess and Laura were saying good-by, Laura strained Elliott tight. "I'll love you forever for this," she whispered.

Then they were off and with them seemed to have gone something indispensable to the well-being of the people who lived in the white house at the end of the road. Elliott, watching the car vanish

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around a turn in the road, hugged Laura's words tight to her heart. It was the only way to keep her knees from wobbling at the thought of what was before her.

CHAPTER X

WHAT 'S IN A DRESS?

OF course Elliott never could have done it without the Gordons. Elliott and Harriet made the crab-apple juice into jelly, Mrs. Gordon sent in bread and cookies, and both mother and daughter stood behind the girl with their skill and experience, ready to be called on at a moment's notice.

"Just send for us any time you get into trouble or want help about something," said Mrs. Gordon over the telephone. "One of us will come right up. Most likely it will be Harriet. I'm so cumbersome, I can't get about as I'd like to. Large bodies move slowly, you know."

Other people besides the Gordons sent

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in things to eat. Elliott thought she had never known such a stream of generosity as set toward the white house at the end of the road—intelligent generosity, too. There seemed a definite plan and some consultation behind it. Mr. Blair brought a roast of beef already cooked, from Mrs. Blair, and hoped for both of them that there would soon be good news of the boy. The Blisses sent in pies enough for two days and asked Elliott to let them know when she was ready for more. People she knew and people she didn't know brought rolls and cookies and doughnuts and gelatines and even roast chickens, and asked, with real anxiety in their voices, for the latest news from Camp Devens.

They did n't bring their offerings all at once; they brought them continuously and steadily and with truly remarkable appropriateness. Just when Elliott was thinking that she must begin to cook, something was sure to rattle up to the door in a

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wagon, or roll up in an automobile, or travel on foot in a basket. It was the extreme timeliness of the gifts that proved the guiding intelligence behind them.

"They could n't all happen so," was Henry's conclusion. "Now, could they? Gee! and I've thought some of those folks were pokes!"

"So have I," said Elliott, feeling very much ashamed of her hasty judgments.

"You never know till you get into trouble how good people are," was Father Bob's verdict.

Gertrude fingered a doughnut ruefully. "I want it, but I'm almost ashamed to eat it, I've thought such horrid things of that old Mrs. Gadsby that made 'em."

"They're good," said Tom. "Mrs. Gadsby knows how to make doughnuts, if she *has* got a tongue in her head! Say, but I'd as soon have thought old Allen would send us doughnuts as the Gadsby."

"Mr. Allen brought us a tongue this

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morning," Elliott remarked; "said his housekeeper boiled it; hoped it was n't too tough to eat. You could n't 'git nothin' good, these days!" "

"*Enoch* Allen?" demanded Henry; "the old fellow that lives at the foot of the hill? Go tell that to the marines!"

"I don't know where he lives," said Elliott, "but he certainly said his name was Enoch Allen."

Bruce chuckled. "Mother Jess's chickens have come home to roost, all right."

"What did she ever do for Enoch Allen?" asked Tom.

"Oh, don't you remember," cried Gertrude, "the time his old dog died? Mother found the dog one day, dying in the woods. I was along and she sent me to call Mr. Allen, while she stayed with the dog. I was just a little girl and kind of scared, but Mother said Mr. Allen was n't anybody to be afraid of; he was just a lonely old man. I heard him tell

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her it was n't every woman would have stayed with his dog. It was dead when he got there."

But even with competent advisers within call and all the aids that came in the shape of "Mother Jess's chickens," and with the best family in the world all eagerness to be helpful and to "carry on" during Laura and Mother Jess's absence, Elliott found that housekeeping was n't half so simple as it looked.

Life still had its moments and she was in the midst of one of the worst of them now. If you have ever stood in a kitchen where little gray kittens of dust rollicked under the chairs and all the dinner kettles and pans were piled on the table, unscrapped and unwashed, and you saw ahead of you more things that you had planned to do than you could possibly get through before supper, and one girl was crying in the attic and another was crying in the china-closet, and your own heart was in your

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boots, you know how Elliott Cameron felt at this minute. Everything had gone wrong, since the time she got up half an hour late in the morning; but the most wrong thing of all was the letter from Laura.

It had come just as they were finishing dinner, for the postman was late. Father Bob had cut it open, while every one looked eager and hopeful. Mother Jess had written the day before that the doctors thought Sidney was better; there had been a telegram to that effect, too. Father Bob read Laura's letter quite through before he opened his lips. It was n't a long letter. Then he said: "The boy's not so well, to-day.—Bruce, we must finish the ensilage. Come out as soon as you're through, boys. Tom, I want you to get in the tomatoes before night. We're due for a freeze, unless signs fail." Not another word about Sidney. And he went right out of the room.

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"What does she say?" whispered Gertrude, dropping her fork so that it rattled against her plate. Gertrude was always dropping things, but this time she didn't flush, as she usually did, at her own awkwardness.

Elliott picked up the letter Father Bob had left beside her plate. She dreaded to unfold the single sheet, but what else could she do, with all those pairs of anxious eyes fixed on her? She steadied her voice and read slowly and without a trace of expression:

"Sidney had a bad time in the night, but is resting more easily this morning. Mother never leaves him. Every one is so good to us here. His officers seem to think a lot of Sid. So do the men of his company, as far as we have seen them. I don't know what to write you, Father. The doctor says, 'While there's life there's hope, and that our coming is the only thing that has saved Sid so far. He says that he has seen the sickest of boys pull through with their mothers here. We will telegraph when there is any change. Love to all of you, dear ones, and

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tell Elliott I shall never forget what she has done for me.

“LAURA”

The room was very still for a minute. Elliott kept her eyes on the letter, to hide the tears that filled them. Sidney was going to die; she knew it.

Slowly, silently, one after another, they all got up from the table. The boys filed out into the kitchen, washed their hands at the sink, and still without a word went about their work. Gertrude and Priscilla began mechanically to clear the table. A plate crashed to the floor from Gertrude's hands and shattered to fragments. She stared at the pieces stupidly, as though wondering how they had come there, took a step in the direction of the dust-pan, and, suddenly bursting into tears, turned and ran out of the room. Elliott could hear her feet pounding up-stairs, on, on, till they reached the attic. A door slammed and all was quiet.

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Down in the kitchen Elliott and Priscilla faced each other. Great round drops were running down Priscilla's cheeks, but she looked up at Elliott trustfully. And then Elliott failed her. She knew herself that she was failing. But it seemed as though she just could n't keep from crying. "Oh, dear!" she sighed. "Oh, dear, is n't everything just *awful*!" Then she did cry.

And over Priscilla's sober little face—Elliott was n't so blinded by her tears that she failed to see it—came the queerest expression of stupefaction and woe and utter forlornness. It was after that that Elliott heard Priscilla sobbing in the china-closet.

Her first impulse was to go to the closet and pull the child out. Her second was to let her stay. "She may as well have her cry out," thought the girl, unhappily. "I could n't do anything to comfort her!"

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—which shows how very, very, very miserable Elliott was, herself.

The world was topsyturvy and would never get right again.

Instead of going for Priscilla she went for a dust-pan and brush and collected the fragments of broken china. Then she began to pile up the dishes, but, after a few futile movements, sat down in a chair and cried again. It did n't seem worth while to do anything else. So now there were three girls crying all at once in that house and every one of them in a different place. When at last Elliott did look in the closet Priscilla was n't there.

The appearance of that usually spotless kitchen had a queer effect on Elliott. She saw so many things needing to be done at once that she did n't do any of them. She simply stood and stared hopelessly at the wreck of comfort and cleanliness and good cheer.

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"Hello!" said Bruce at the door.
"Want an extra hand for an hour?"

"I thought you were cutting ensilage," said Elliott. It was good to see Bruce; the courage in his voice lifted her spirits in spite of her.

"I've left a substitute." The boy glanced into the stove and started for the wood-box.

"Oh, dear! I forgot that fire. Has it gone out?"

"Not quite. I'll have it going again in a jiff."

He came back with a broom in his hands.

"Let me do that," said the girl.

"Oh, all right." He relinquished the broom and brought out the dish-pan.

"Hi-yi, Stan, lend a hand here!"

The boy in the doorway gave one glance at Elliott's tear-stained face and came quietly into the room. "Sure," he said,

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picking up a dish-cloth and gingerly reaching for a tumbler. "Which end do you take 'em by, top or bottom?"

Stannard wiping dishes, and with Bruce Fearing! The sight was so strange that Elliott's broom stopped moving. The two boys at the dish-pan chaffed each other good-naturedly; their jokes might have seemed a little forced, had you examined them carefully, but the effect was normal and cheering. Now and then they threw a word to the girl and the pile of clean dishes grew under their hands.

Elliott's broom began to move again. Something warm stirred at her heart. She felt sober and humble and ashamed and—yes, happy—all at once. How nice boys were when they were nice!

Then she remembered something.

"Oh, Stan, was n't it to-day you were going home?"

"Nix," Stannard replied. "Guess I'll

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stay on a bit. School has n't begun. I want to go nutting before I hit the trail for home."

It was a different-looking kitchen the boys left half an hour later and a different-looking girl.

Bruce lingered a minute behind Standard. "We have n't had any telegram," he said. "Remember that. And as for things in here, I would n't let 'em bother me, if I were you! You can't do everything, you know. Keep cool, feed us the stuff folks send in, and let some things slide."

"Mother Jess does n't let things slide."

"Mother Jess has been at it a good many years, but I'll bet she would now and then if things got too thick and she could n't keep both ends up. There's more to Mother Jess's job than what they call housekeeping."

"Oh, yes," sighed Elliott, "I know that.

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But just what do you mean, Bruce, that I could do?"

He hesitated a minute. "Well, call it morale. That suggests the thing."

Elliott thought hard for a minute after the door closed on Bruce. Perhaps, after all, seeing that the family had three meals a day and lived in a decently clean house and slept warm at night, necessary as such oversight was, was n't the most imperative business in hand. Somehow or other those things were n't at all what came into her mind when she thought of Aunt Jessica—no, indeed, though Aunt Jessica made such perfectly delicious things to eat. What came into her mind was far different—like the way Aunt Jessica had sat on Elliott's bed and kissed her, that homesick first night; Aunt Jessica's face at meal-time, with Uncle Bob across the table and all her boys and girls filling the space between; Aunt Jessica comforting

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Priscilla when the child had met with some mishap. Priscilla seldom cried when she hurt herself; "Mother kisses the place and makes it well." The words linked themselves with Bruce's in Elliott's thought. Was that what he had meant by morale? She could n't have put into words what she understood just then. For a minute a door in her brain seemed to swing open and she saw straight into the heart of things. Then it clicked together and left her saying, "I guess I fell down on that part of my job, Mother Jess."

Elliott hung up her apron and mounted the stairs. She didn't stop with the second floor and her own little room, but kept right on to the attic. There was a door at the head of the attic stairs. Elliott pushed it open. On a broken-backed horsehair sofa Gertrude lay, face down, her nose buried in a faded pillow. In a wabby rocker, at imminent risk of a

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breakdown, Priscilla jerked back and forth. Gertrude's hair was tousled and Priscilla's face was tear-stained and swollen.

"Don't you think," Elliott suggested, "it is time we girls washed our faces and made ourselves pretty?"

"I left you all the dishes to do." Gertrude's voice was muffled by the pillow. "I—I just could n't help it."

"That's all right. They're done now. I did n't do them, either. Let's go downstairs and wash up."

"I don't want to be pretty," Priscilla objected, continuing to rock. Gertrude neither moved nor spoke again.

What should Elliott do? She remembered Bruce.

"We have n't had any telegram, you know," she said. Nobody spoke. "Well, then, we were three little geese, were n't we? Not having had a telegram means a lot just now." Priscilla stopped rocking.

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"I'm going to believe Sidney will get well," Elliott continued. It was hard work to talk to such unresponsive ears, but she kept right on. "And now I am going down-stairs to put on one of my prettiest dresses, so as to look cheerful for supper. You may try whether you can get into that blue dress of mine you like so much, Trudy. I'm going to let Priscilla wear my coral beads."

"The pink ones?" asked Priscilla.

"The pink ones. They will be just a match for your pink dress."

"I don't feel like dressing up," said Gertrude.

Elliott felt like clapping her hands. She had roused Trudy to speech.

"Then wear something of your own," she said stanchly. "It doesn't matter what we wear, so long as we look nice."

Mercurial Priscilla was already feeling the new note in the air. Elliott would n't talk so, would she, if Sidney really were

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not going to get well? And yet there was Gertrude, who did n't seem to feel cheered up a bit. Pris's little heart was torn.

Elliott tried one last argument. "I think Mother Jess would like to have us do it for Father Bob and the boys' sake—to help keep up their courage."

Priscilla bounced out of the rocker. "Will it help keep up their courage for us to wear our pretty clothes?"

"I had a notion it might."

"Let's do it, Trudy. I—I think I feel better already."

Gertrude sat up on the horsehair sofa. "Maybe Mother would like us to."

"I'm sure she'd like us to keep on hoping," said Elliott earnestly. "And it does n't matter what we do, so long as we do something to show that's the way we've made up our minds to feel. If you can think of any better way to show it than by dressing up, Trudy—"

"No," said Gertrude. "But I think I'll

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wear my own clothes to-day, Elliott. Thank you, just the same. Some day, if Sid—I mean some day I'll love to try on your blue dress, if you will let me."

Three girls, as pretty and chic and trim as nature and the contents of their closets could make them, sat down to supper that night. It was not a jolly meal, but the girls set the pace, and every one did his best to be cheerful and brave.

Half-way through supper Stannard laid down his fork to ask a question. "What's happened to your hair, Trudy?"

"Elliott did it for me. Do you like it?"

Stannard nodded. "Good work!"

Father Bob, his attention aroused, inspected the three with new interest in his sober eyes. He said nothing then, but after supper his hand fell on Elliott's shoulder approvingly.

"Well done, little girl! That's the right way. Face the music with your chin up."

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Elliott felt exactly as though some one had stiffened her spine. The least little doubt had been creeping into her mind lest what she had done had been heartless. Father Bob's words put that qualm at rest. And, of course, good news would come from Sidney in the morning.

But courage has a way of ebbing in spite of one. It was dark and very cold when a forlorn little figure appeared beside Elliott's bed.

"I can't go to sleep. Trudy's asleep. I can hear her. I think I am going to cry again."

Elliott sat up. What should she do? What would Aunt Jessica do?

"Come in here and cry on me."

Priscilla climbed in between the sheets and Elliott put both arms around the little girl. Priscilla snuggled close.

"I tried to think—the way you said, but I can't. *Is* Sidney—" snuffle—"going to die—" snuffle—"like Ted Gordon?"

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"No," said Elliott, who a minute ago had been afraid of the very same thing. "No, I am perfectly positive he is going to get well."

Just saying the words seemed to help, somehow.

Priscilla snuggled closer. "You're awful comforting. A person gets scared at night."

"A person does, indeed."

"Not so much when you've got company," said Priscilla.

The warmth of the little body in her arms struck through to Elliott's own shivering heart. "Not half so much when you've got company," she acknowledged.

CHAPTER XI

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SURE enough, in the morning came better news. Father Bob's face, when he turned around from the telephone, told that, even before he opened his lips.

"Sidney is holding his own," he said.

You may think that was n't much better news, but it meant a great deal to the Camerons. "Sidney is holding his own," they told every one who inquired, and their faces were hopeful. If Father Bob had any fears, he kept them to himself. The rest of the Camerons were young and it did n't seem possible to them that Sidney could do anything but get well. Last night had been a bad dream, that was all.

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The next morning's message had the word "better" in it. "Little" stood before "better," but nobody, not even Father Bob, paid much attention to "little." Sidney was better. It was a week before Mother Jess wrote that the doctors pronounced him out of danger and that she and Laura would soon be home. Meanwhile, many things had happened.

You might have thought that Sidney's illness was enough trouble to come to the Camerons at one time, but as Bruce quoted with a twist in his smile, "It never rains but it pours." This time Bruce himself got the message which came from the War Department and read:

You are informed that Lieutenant Peter Fearing has been reported missing since September fifteenth. Letter follows.

The Camerons felt as badly as though Peter Fearing had been their own brother.

"The telegram does n't say that he's

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dead," Trudy declared, over and over again.

"Maybe he's a prisoner," Tom suggested.

"Perhaps he had to come down in a wood somewhere," Henry speculated, "and will get back to our lines."

"The government makes mistakes sometimes," Stannard said. "There was a woman in Upton—" He went on with a long story about a woman whose son was reported killed in France on the very day the boy had been in his mother's house on furlough from a cantonment. There were a great many interesting and ingenious details to the story, but nobody paid much attention to them. "So you never can tell," Stannard wound up.

"No, you never can tell," Bruce agreed, but he didn't look convinced. Something, he was quite sure, was wrong with Pete.

"Don't anybody write Mother Jess," he

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said. "She and Laura have enough to worry about with Sid."

"What if they see it in the papers?" Elliott asked.

"They 're busy. Ten to one they won't see it, since it is n't head-lined on the front page. Wait till we get the letter."

"How soon do you suppose the letter will come?" Gertrude wished to know.

"'Letter follows,'" Henry read from the yellow slip which the postman delivered from the telegraph office. "That means right away, I should say."

"Maybe it does and maybe it does n't," said Tom and then *he* had a story to tell. It did n't take Tom long, for he was a boy of fewer words than Stannard.

Morning, noon, and night the Camerons speculated about that telegram. They combed its words with a fine-toothed comb, but they could n't make anything out of them except the bald fact that Pete was missing.

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If you think they let it go at that, you are very much mistaken. Where the fact stopped the Cameron imaginations began, and imaginations never know where to stop. The less actual information an imagination has to work on, the busier it is. The Camerons had n't any more imagination than most people, but what they had grew very busy. It fairly amazed them with its activity. If you think that this was silly and that they ought to have chained up their imaginations until the promised letter arrived, it only shows that you have never received any such telegram.

After all, the letter, when it came, didn't tell them much. The letter said that Lieutenant Peter Fearing had gone out with his squadron on a bombing-expedition well within the enemy lines. The formation had successfully accomplished its raid and was returning when it was taken by surprise and surrounded

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by a greatly superior force of enemy planes, which gave the Americans a running fight of thirty-nine minutes to their lines. Lieutenant Fearing's was one of two planes which failed to return to the aërodrome. When last seen, his machine was in combat with four Hun planes over enemy territory.

"What did I tell you?" interrupted Tom. "He's a prisoner."

An airplane had been reported as falling in flames near this spot, but whether it was Lieutenant Fearing's machine or another, no data was as yet at hand to prove. The writer begged to remain, etc.

No, that letter only opened up fresh fields for Cameron imaginations to torment Cameron hearts. Nobody had happened to think before of Pete's machine catching fire.

"Gee!" said Henry, "if that plane was his—"

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"There's no certainty that it was," said Bruce, quickly.

All the Camerons, you see, knew perfectly well what happens to an aviator whose machine catches fire.

"If that machine was Pete's," Father Bob mused, "Hun aviators may drop word of him within our lines. They have done that kind of thing before."

"Would n't Bob cable, if he knew anything more than this letter says?" Gertrude questioned.

"I expect Bob's waiting to find out something certain before he cables," said Father Bob. "Doubtless he has written. We shall just have to wait for his letter."

"Wait! Gee!" whispered Henry.

"Both the boys' letters were so awfully late, in the summer!" sighed Gertrude. "However can we wait for a letter from Bob?"

Elliott said nothing at all. Her heart

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was aching with sympathy for Bruce. When a person could do something, she thought, it helped tremendously. Mother Jess and Laura had gone to Sidney and she had had a chance to make Laura's going possible, but there did n't seem to be anything she could do for Bruce. And she wished to do something for Bruce; she found that she wished to tremendously. Thinking about Mother Jess and Laura reminded her to look up and ask, "*What are we going to write them at Camp Devens?*"

Then she discovered that she and Bruce were alone in the room. He was sitting at Mother Jess's desk, in as deep a brown study as she had been. The girl's voice roused him.

"The kind of thing we've been writing—home news. Time enough to tell them about Pete when they get here. By that time, perhaps, there will be something definite to tell." He hesitated a

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minute. "Laura is going to feel pretty well cut up over this."

Elliott looked up quickly. "Especially cut up?"

"I think so. Oh, there was n't anything definite between her and Pete—nothing, at least, that they told the rest of us. But a fellow who had eyes—" He left the sentence unfinished and walked over to Elliott's chair. "You know, I told you," he said, "that I should n't go into this war unless I was called. Of course I'm registered now, but whether or not they call me—if Pete is out of it—and I can possibly manage it, I'm going in."

A queer little pain contracted Elliott's heart. And then that odd heart of hers began to swell and swell until she thought it would burst. She looked at the boy, with proud eyes. It did n't occur to her to wonder what she was proud of. Bruce Fearing was no kin of hers, you know.

"I knew you would." Somehow it

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seemed to the girl that she could always tell what Bruce Fearing was going to do, and that there was nothing strange in such knowledge. How strong he was! how splendid and understanding and fine! "Oh," she cried, "I wish, *how* I wish I could help you!"

"You do help me," he said.

"I?" Her eyes lifted in real surprise. "How can I?"

"By being you."

His hand had only to move an inch to touch hers, but it lay motionless. His eyes, gray and steady and clear, held the girl's. She gave him back look for look.

"I am glad," she said softly and her face was like a flower.

Bruce was out of the house before Elliott thought of the thing she could do for him.

"Mercy me!" she cried. "You're the slowest person I've ever seen in my life, Elliott Cameron!" She ran to the kitchen

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door, but the boy was nowhere in sight. "He must be out at the barn," she said and took a step in that direction, only to take it back. "No, I won't. I'll just go by myself *and do it.*"

Whatever it was, it put her in a great hurry. As fast as she had dashed to the kitchen she now ran to the front hall, but the third step of the stairs halted her.

"Elliott Cameron," she declared earnestly, "I do believe you have lost your mind! Have n't you any sense *at all?* And you a responsible housekeeper!"

Perhaps it was n't the first time a whirlwind had ever struck the Cameron farmhouse. Elliott had n't a notion that she could work so fast. Her feet fairly flew. Bed-covers whisked into place; dusting-cloths raced over furniture; even milk-pans moved with unwonted celerity. But she left them clean, clean and shining.

"There!" said the girl, "now we shall do well enough till dinner-time. I'm go-

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ing into the village. Anybody want to come?"

Priscilla jumped up. "I do, unless Trudy wants to more."

Gertrude shook her head. "I 'm going to put up tomatoes," she said, "the rest of the ripe ones."

"Don't you want help?"

"Not a bit. Tomatoes are no work, at all."

Elliott dashed up-stairs. In a whirl of excitement she pinned on her hat and counted her money. No matter how much it cost, she meant to say all that she wanted to.

Her cheeks were pink and her dimples hard at work playing hide-and-seek with their own shadows, when she cranked the little car. Everything would come right now; it couldn't fail to come right. Priscilla hopped into the seat beside her and they sped away.

"I have cabled Father," Elliott an-

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nounced at dinner, with the prettiest imaginable little air of importance and confidence, "I have cabled Father to find out all he can about Pete and to let us know *at once*. Perhaps we shall hear something to-morrow."

But the next day passed, and the next, and the day after that, and still no cable from Father.

It was very bewildering. At first Elliott jumped every time the telephone rang, and took down the receiver with quickened pulses. No matter what her brain said, her heart told her Father would send good news. She could n't associate him with thoughts of ill news. Of course, her brain said there was no logic in that kind of argument, and that facts were facts; and in a case like Pete's, fathers could n't make or mar them. Her heart kept right on expecting good tidings.

But when long days and longer nights dragged themselves by and no word at all

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came from overseas, the girl found out what a big empty place the world may become, even while it is chuck-full of people, and what three thousand miles of water really means. She thought she had known before, but she had n't. So long as letters traveled back and forth, irregularly timed it might be, but continuously, she still kept the familiar sense of Father—out of sight, but there, as he had always been, most dependably *there*. Now, for the first time in her life, she had called to him and he had not answered. There might be—there probably were, she reminded herself—reasons why he had n't answered; good, reassuring reasons, if one only knew them. He might be temporarily in a region out of touch with cables; the service might have dropped a link somewhere. One could imagine possible explanations. But it was easier to imagine other things. And the fact remained that, since he did n't answer, she

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could n't get away from a horrible, paralyzing sense that he was n't there.

It did n't do any good to try to run from that sensation; there was nowhere to run. It blocked every avenue of thought, a sinister shape of dread. The only help was in keeping very, very busy. And even then one could n't stop one's thoughts traveling, traveling, traveling along those fearful paths.

At last Elliott knew how the others felt about Pete. She had thought she understood that and felt it, too, but now she found that she had n't. It makes all the difference in the world, she discovered, whether one stands inside or outside a trouble. The heart that had ached so sympathetically for Bruce knew its first stab of loss and recoiled. The others recognized the difference; or was it only that Elliott herself had eyes to see what she had been blind to before? No one said anything. In little unconscious, lovable

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ways they made it quite clear that now she was one with them.

"Perhaps we would better send for them to come home from Camp Devens," Father Bob suggested one day. He threw out his remark at the supper-table, which would seem to address it to the family at large, but he looked straight at Elliott.

"Oh, no," she cried, "don't *send* for them!" But she could n't keep a flash of joy out of her eyes.

"Sure you 're not getting tired?"

"Certain sure!"

It disappointed her the least little bit that Uncle Bob let the suggestion drop so readily. And she was disappointed at her own disappointment. "Can't you 'carry on' *at all?*" she demanded of herself, scornfully. "It was all your own doing, you know." But how she did long at times for Aunt Jessica!

Of course, Elliott could n't cry, however much she might wish to, with the family

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all taking their cues from her mood. She said so fiercely to every lump that rose in her throat. She could n't indulge herself at all adequately in the luxury of being miserable; she could n't even let herself feel half as scared as she wished to, because, if she did, just once, she could n't keep control of herself, and if she lost control of herself there was no telling where she might end—certainly in no state that would be of any use to the family. No, for their sake, she must sit tight on the lid of her grief and fear and anxiety.

But there were hours when the cover lifted a little. No girl, not the bravest, could avoid such altogether. Elliott did n't think herself brave, not a bit. She knew merely that the thing she had to do could n't be done if there were many such hours.

One day Bruce heard somebody sobbing up in the hay-loft. The sound did n't carry far; it was controlled, suppressed;

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but Bruce had gone up the ladder for something or other, I forget just what, and, thinking Priscilla was in trouble, he kept on. The girl crying, face down in the hay, was n't Priscilla. Very softly Bruce started to tiptoe away, but the rustling of the hay under his feet betrayed him.

"I did n't mean—any one to—find me."

"Shall I go away?"

She shook her head. "I can't stand it!" she wailed. "I simply can't *stand it!*" And she sobbed as though her heart would break.

Bruce sat down beside the girl on the hay and patted the hand nearest him. He did n't know anything else to do. Her fingers closed on his convulsively.

"I'm an awful old cry-baby," she choked at last. "I'll behave myself, in a minute."

"No, cry away," said Bruce. "A girl has to cry sometimes."

MISSING

After a while the racking sobs spent themselves. "There!" she said, sitting up. "I never thought I'd let a boy see me cry. Now I must go in and help Trudy get supper."

She dabbed at her eyes with a wet little wad of linen. Bruce plucked a clean handkerchief from his pocket and tucked it into her fingers.

"Yours does n't seem quite big enough for the job," he said.

She took it gratefully. She had never thought of a boy as a very comforting person, but Bruce was. "Oh, Bruce, you *know!*"

"Yes, I know."

"It's so—so lonely. Dad's all I've got, of my really own, in the world."

He nodded. "You're gritty, all right."

"Why, Bruce Fearing! how can you say that after the way I've acted?"

"That's why I say it."

"But I'm scared all the time. If I did

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what I wanted to, I'd be a perpetual fountain."

"And you're not."

She stared at him. "Is being scared and trying to cover it up what you call grit?"

"The grittiest kind of grit."

For a sophisticated girl she was singularly naïve, at times. He watched her digest the idea, sitting up on the hay, her chin cupped in her two hands, straws in her hair. Her eyes were swollen and her nose red, and his handkerchief was now almost as wet as her own. "I thought I was an awful coward," she said.

A smile curved his firm lips, but the steady gray eyes were tender. "I should n't call you a coward."

She shook herself and stood up. "Bruce, you're a darling. Now, will you please go and see if the coast is clear, so I can slide up-stairs without being seen? I must wash up before supper."

MISSING

"I 'd get supper," he said, "if I did n't have to milk to-night. Promised Henry."

She shook her head positively. "I 'll let you do lots of things, Bruce, but I won't let you get supper for me—not with all the other things you have to do."

"Oh, all right! I dare you to jump off the hay."

"Down there? Take you!" she cried, and with the word sprang into the air.

Beside her the boy leaped, too. They landed lightly on the fragrant mass in the bay of the barn.

"Oh," she cried, "it 's like flying, is n't it! Why was n't I brought up on a farm?"

There was a little choke still left in her voice, and her smile was a trifle unsteady, but her words were ready enough. In the doorway she turned and waved to the boy and then went on, her head held high, slender and straight and gallant, into the house.

CHAPTER XII

HOME-LOVING HEARTS

MOTHER JESS and Laura were coming home. Perhaps Father Bob had dropped a hint that their presence was needed in the white house at the end of the road; perhaps, on the other hand, they were just ready to come. Elliott never knew for certain.

Father Bob met the train, while all the Cameron boys and girls flew around, making ready at home. The plan had developed on the tacit understanding that since they all wished to, it was fairer for none of them to go to the station.

Priscilla and Prince were out watching. "They're coming!" she squealed, skipping back into the house. "Trudy, Elliott,

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everybody, they're coming!" And she was out again, darting in long swallow-like swoops down the hill. From every direction came Camerons, running; from house, barn, garden, young heads moved swiftly toward the little car chug-chugging up the hill.

They swarmed over it, not giving it time to stop, jumping on the running-board, riding on the hood, almost embracing the car itself in the joy of their welcome. Elliott hung back. The others had the first right. After their turns—

Without a word Aunt Jessica took the girl into her arms and held her tight. In that strong, tender clasp all the stinging ache went out of Elliott's hurt. She was n't frightened any longer or bewildered or bitter; she did n't know why she was n't, but she was n't. She felt just as if, somehow or other, things were going to be right.

She had this feeling so strongly that she

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forgot all about dreading to meet Laura—for she had dreaded to meet Laura, she was so sorry for her—and kissed her quite naturally. Laura kissed Elliott in return and said, "Wait till I get you up-stairs," as though she meant business, and smiled just as usual. Her face was a trifle pale, but her eyes were bright, and the clear, steady glow in them reminded Elliott for the first time of the light in Aunt Jessica's eyes. She had n't remembered ever seeing Laura's eyes look just like that. How much did Laura know, Elliott wondered? She would n't look so, would she, if she had heard about Pete? But, strangely enough, Elliott did n't fear her finding out or feel nervous lest she might have to tell her.

And after all, as soon as they got up-stairs, it came out that Laura did know about Pete, for she said: "I'm glad, oh, so glad, that wherever Pete is now, he got across and had a chance really to do some-

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thing in this fight. If you had seen what I have seen this last week, Elliott—”

The shining look in Laura's face fascinated Elliott.

All at once she felt her own words come as simply and easily as Laura's. “But will that be enough, Laura—always?”

“No,” said Laura, “not always. But I shall always be proud and glad, even if I do have to miss him all my life. And, of course, I can't help feeling that we may hear good news yet. Now—oh, you blessed, blessed girl!”

And the two clung together in a long close embrace that said many things to both of them, but not a word aloud.

How good it seemed to have Mother Jess and Laura in the house! Every one went about with a hopeful face, though, after all, not an inch had the veil of silence lifted that hung between the Cameron farm and the world overseas. Every one, Elliott suspected, shared the feeling she

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had known, the certainty that all would be well now Mother Jess was home. It was n't anything in particular that Mother Jess said or did that contributed to this impression. Just to see her face in a room, to touch her hand now and then, to hear her voice, merely to know she was in the house, seemed enough to give it.

They all had so much to say to one another. The returned travelers must tell of Sidney, and the Camerons who had stayed at home had tales of how they had "carried on" in the others' absence. Tongues were very busy, but no one forgot those who were n't there—not for a minute. The sense of them lived underneath all the confidences. There were confidences *en masse*, so to speak, and confidences *à deux*. Priscilla chattered away into her mother's ear without once stopping to catch breath, and Bruce had his own quiet report to make. Perhaps Bruce and Priscilla and the rest said more than

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Elliott heard, for when Aunt Jessica bade her good-night she rested a hand lightly on the girl's shoulder.

"You dear, brave little woman!" she said. "All the soldiers are n't in camp or over the seas."

Elliott put the words away in her memory. They made her feel like a man who has just been decorated by his general.

She felt so comforted and quiet, so free from nervousness, that not even the telephone bell could make her jump. It tinkled pretty continuously, too. That was because all the next day the neighbors who did n't come in person were calling up to inquire for the returned travelers. Elliott quite lost the expectation that every time the telephone buzzed it meant a possible message for her.

She had lost it so completely that when, as they were on the point of sitting down at supper, Laura said, "There's the tele-

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phone again, and my hands are full," Elliott remarked, "I'll see who it is," and took down the receiver without a thought of a cable.

"This is Elliott Cameron speaking. . . . Yes—yes. Elliott Cameron. All ready." A tremor crept into the girl's voice. "I didn't get that. . . . Just received my message? Yes, go on. . . . Repeat, please. . . . Wait a minute till I call some one."

She wheeled from the instrument, her face alight. "Where's Bruce? Please, somebody, call—oh, here you are!" She thrust the receiver into his hands. "Make them repeat the message to you. It's from Father. Pete was a prisoner. He's escaped and got back to our lines."

Then she slipped into Aunt Jessica's waiting arms.

Supper? Who cared about supper? The Camerons forgot it. When they remembered, the steaming-hot creamed

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potato was cold and the salad was wilted, but that made no difference. They were too excited to know what they were eating.

To make assurance trebly sure there were more messages. Bob cabled of Pete's escape through the Hun lines and the government wired from Washington. The Camerons' happiness spilled over into blithe exuberance. They laughed and danced and sang for very joy. Priscilla jigged all over the house like an excited brown leaf in a breeze. None of them, except Father Bob, Mother Jess, and Laura, could keep still. Laura went about like a person in a trance, with a strange, happy quietness in her ordinarily energetic movements and a brightness in her face that dazzled. There was no boisterousness in any one's rejoicing, only a gentleness of gaiety that was very wonderful to see and feel.

As for Elliott, she felt as though she had come out from underneath a great

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dark cloud, into a place where she could never again be anything but good and happy. She had been coming out ever since Aunt Jessica reached home, but she had n't come out the same as she went in. The Elliott Aunt Jessica and Laura had left in charge when they went to Camp Devens seemed very, very far away from the Elliott whose joy was like wings that fairly lifted her feet off the ground. Smiles chased one another among her dimples in ceaseless procession across her face. She did n't try to discover why she felt so different. She did n't care. The dimples, of course, were the very same dimples she had always had, and at the moment the girl was entirely unconscious of their existence, though as a matter of fact those dimples had never been busier and more bewitching in all Elliott Cameron's life.

"I suppose," Mother Jess said at last,

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"we shall have to go to bed, if we are to get Stannard off in the morning."

Going to bed is n't a very exciting thing to do when you are so happy you feel as though you might burst with joy, but by that time the Camerons had managed to work out of the most dangerous stage, and inasmuch as Stannard's was an early train, going to bed was the only sensible thing to do. So they did it.

What was more remarkable, the last sleepy Cameron straggled down to the breakfast-table before the little car ran up to the door to take Stannard away. They were really sorry to see him go and he acted as though he were just as sorry to go, which would seem to indicate that Stannard, too, had changed in the course of the summer. He looked much like the long, lazy Stannard who had rebelled against a vacation on a farm, but his carriage was better and his figure sturdier,

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and his hands were n't half so white and gentlemanlike. Underneath his lazy ease was a hint of something to depend on in an emergency. Perhaps even his laziness was n't so ingrained as it used to be.

They all went out on the veranda to say good-by and waved as long as the car was in sight.

"Sorry you're not going, too?" Bruce asked Elliott.

"Oh, no! I would n't go for anything."

"For a girl who did n't want to come up here at all," he said softly, "you're doing pretty well. Decided to make the best of us, did n't you?"

She looked at him indignantly. "Indeed, I did n't! I would n't do such a thing. Why, I just *love* it here!" Then she saw the twinkle in his eye. "You tease!"

"I'm going away, myself, next week, S. A. T. C. I can't get any nearer France than that, it seems, just yet. Father Bob

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says he can manage all right this winter and he has a notion of something new that may turn up next spring. He says, 'Go,' and so does Mother Jess. So—I'm going."

Elliott stole a quick glance at the firm, clear-cut face, chiseled already in lines of purpose and power.

"I'm glad," she said, "but we shall—miss you."

"Shall *you* miss me?"

"Yes."

"I'd hate to think that you would n't."

Elliott always remembered the morning, three days later, when Bruce went away. How blue the sky was, how clear the sunshine, how glorious the autumn pageant of the hills! Beside the gate a young maple burned like a shaft of flame. True, Bruce was only going to school now, but there was France in the background, a beckoning possibility with all that it meant of triumph and heroism and pain. That idea

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of France, and the fiery splendor of the hills, seemed to invest Bruce's strong young figure with a kind of glory that tightened the girl's throat as she waved good-by from the veranda. She was glad Bruce was going, even if her throat did ache. Aches like that seemed far less important than they used to. She waved with a thrill coursing up her spine and a shy, eager sense of how big and wonderful and happy a thing it was to be a girl.

With a last wave to Bruce turning the curve of the road Mother Jess stepped back into the house.

"Come, girls," she said. "I feel like getting very busy, don't you?"

Elliott followed her contentedly. Others might go, but she did n't wish to, not while Father was on the other side of the ocean. It made her laugh to think that she had ever wished to. That laugh of pure mirth and happiness proved the completeness of Elliott Cameron's evacuation.

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“What is the joke?” Laura asked, smiling at the radiant charm of the dainty figure enveloping itself in a blue apron.

“Oh,” said Elliott lightly, “I was thinking that I used to be a queer girl.”

THE END.

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